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**Flying the Sign: A Year in the
Life of a Homeless Man**

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Life of a Homeless Man**

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Flying the Sign: A Year in the Life of a Homeless Man

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This work of narrative ethnography focuses on the life of a homeless man, a “street person” named Dan, who begged at an intersection of a major thoroughfare in Waco, Texas, near I35. The narrative is in the form of dialogues with the informant, in temporal sequence, and thematically presented. The fieldwork for this ethnography occurred over a thirteen-month period, from March, 1998 to April, 1999. The primary theme pervading this ethnography is that begging may be considered a form of legitimate *vocation*, with the usual concomitants of work. The ethnographer recognizes that the ethnocentric beliefs and values of the dominant culture portray a beggar’s life as devoid of a work ethic, and offers instead a corrective vision, from a member of that subculture, into the meanings attached to his work. Other issues and topics are addressed besides vocation, such as invisibility, dramaturgy and impression management, the disease concept of alcoholism, the existential features of this marginal lifestyle, and degree of criminal participation.

The ethnography presents Dan's lifestyle from his point of view, in the hope of fostering understanding, tolerance, and perhaps an appreciation for certain subcultural differences. And the challenges to prevailing cultural fashions that Dan presents with his provocative lifestyle are also, in some sense, defiant and subversive in character.

Dan's situation in life is embedded in a larger historical, economic, and cultural milieu. From an etiological point of view, Dan's situation seemed to stem primarily from his predicament with alcoholism. At some point in time, his drinking behavior even became an essential ingredient in his identity. One cannot fully understand Dan's life or the life of many other street persons without understanding the powerful force that addiction has in steering one toward goals within a marginal lifestyle.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Reunion with Dan.....	17
Chapter 3 Day Camp.....	31
Chapter 4 Work and Drink I	37
Chapter 5 Hollywood and Ethics	44
Chapter 6 Fear and Loathing in Waco	51
Chapter 7 Work and Drink II.....	58
Chapter 8 Drinking to Live	65
Chapter 9 The Cane Thicket	72
Chapter 10 Easter Sunday	79
Chapter 11 Invisibility	90
Chapter 12 Kinship.....	98
Chapter 13 Apprenticeship	104
Chapter 14 Rick	125
Chapter 15 Dark Night of the Soul	131
Chapter 16 Vocation and Calling.....	140
Chapter 17 Humility and Humiliation	153
Chapter 18 Poverty, Freedom, and Storytelling.....	158
Chapter 19 Life Goes On and Life Ends.....	164
Chapter 20 Ethnographic Recap	167
Appendix: Notes on Method.....	173
Bibliography	175

Vita	178
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“And so, I wondered why you always comment on what is actually said between us, but you never comment on my *interpretations* of what is said.” Dan looked me straight in the eye and said, with emphasis: “That’s because that’s what’s important. What we *say* is what’s important. The other--well, you gotta do that in college. But what is important is in the *words*, and *you* gotta find it.”

This is primarily a work of narrative ethnography focusing on the life of a homeless man, a “street person” named Dan, who begged at an intersection of a major thoroughfare in Waco, Texas, near I35. At the beginning of my encounters with Dan, he was forty-five years old. The narrative is in the form of dialogues with my informant, in temporal sequence, and thematically presented.

The fieldwork for this ethnography occurred over a thirteen-month period, from March 20, 1998 through April 19, 1999. I met with Dan for a different number of hours on each of 124 days. On most of those days, I spent an average of three to four hours with him, observing him, interviewing him, and participating in his lifestyle. On twelve occasions, I stayed with Dan, around the clock, for roughly three days apiece. I met with Dan in his two camps, on the street, in a convenience store, at the outdoor Church under the Bridge, and at a local hospital. Sometimes I drove him to various locations. I even relented to his gentle pressures to try some street begging myself. I spoke with Dan and his companions, although he was usually alone.

I am familiar with some ethnographic works regarding homelessness or poverty, but the work that originally sparked my interest in this general area of research was *You Owe Yourself a Drunk* (1988 ed.) by James Spradley. This was the first ethnography I

read on homelessness, in the early 1970s, and I was intrigued with the special population that Spradley studied (alcohol abusers) and the famous setting in which that population flourished (Skid Road). Another related work that I read about this time was Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967). Thus my interests have been in urban studies and more specifically in studies of marginality, deviance, and chemical dependency.

Methodologically, I am partial to participant observation and symbolic interactionism. Interpretively, I am influenced by Goffman's dramaturgical analysis (1956, 1959, 1963) and Geertz' hermeneutical technique (1972).

As a presentation, I have been largely influenced by Jackson Underwood's work of narrative ethnography, *The Bridge People: Daily Life in a Camp of the Homeless* (1993). In this work, Underwood portrays the life of a particular homeless man, Jerry, who lived for years under one of the overpasses in the heart of Los Angeles. His work is temporally structured in the form of *dialogues* between him and Jerry, his primary informant. The dialogical format enhances the narrative and captures the imagination in ways that allows one to better understand and vicariously experience the encounters between Underwood and Jerry.

For the past twenty-five years I have observed a specific type of street person and have been intrigued with his behavior on street corners, presenting a sign with words, waiting for encounters with motorists. I wondered who these people really were, where they lived, what their lives were like. I was fascinated by their ability to appear and disappear, about their forms of symbolic communication, and by the stark contrasts in the elements or ingredients of the encounters. Susser remarks that scanty research has been

done by anthropologists into the invisibility of the poor (1996:411). Invisibility as a cultural phenomenon has pricked my attention for years, as well as the literature dealing with it (Coser 1969; Ellison 1947; Myrdal 1962; Griffin 1977; Dostoevsky 1864).

Spradley addressed, to some extent, the phenomenon of invisibility and alienation among Seattle “nomads” in his arguments of how law enforcement officials actually perpetuate the very way of life they are trying to eradicate (1988).

I was also aware of some public perceptions about these street corner encounters, as expressed in newspaper editorials and general public sentiment. I had a sense that some of the dynamics of these exchanges and that some of the differences in realities between these subjects were largely unknown and unexplored. Although cultural exchanges were taking place on some level, very little dialogue was occurring between the participants. And so I began visiting with street people at various locations in the Waco area, at street corners, at the “Church under the Bridge,” and at the Salvation Army soup kitchen where I was a volunteer.

A few years later, I met Dan and formed a friendship with him and a partnership in the present study. I became fascinated with the story of his life and his understanding of the world and his place in it. This work is an expression of my fieldwork with Dan and the insights that I gained from him. My intent was to discover Dan’s worldview and how he survived as a street person. I was interested in his techniques of survival, particularly through his encounters with motorists that would involve symbolic communication on several levels. I was also interested in his chemical dependency and what effect it had had on his life’s choices and worldview.

While examining the content of field notes, I became intrigued with a feature of Dan's story that went against the grain of some public perceptions. My own bias had been something along these lines: that Dan was unfortunate in what life had dealt him, that he had lost traits which supply one with a social identity and meaningful fulfillment, such as job, income, home, property, health regimens, and family. Dan appeared to be the opposite of an epitome of anything or anyone. What I came to understand, however, is that Dan viewed his life's activities as purposeful, meaningful, and fulfilling. And he considered his panhandling activities as a *vocation*. This discovery steered me in the direction of some other literature dealing with vocation and calling, such as the works of James Hillman, the post-Jungian archetypal psychologist, and Gregg Levoy's work, *Callings*. But these works also addressed a struggle I had had with the problem of informant accuracy, as elucidated by Bernard *et al.* (1984). I was not naïve to think that Dan's story was entirely historical, and I labored over this issue without realizing that it was largely unimportant in supplying me with Dan's worldview. It is difficult enough for me to recall the events in my own life with complete objectivity. The insights of Hillman and Levoy allowed me to see the value in Dan's story, regardless of its factual historicity.

The primary theme pervading this ethnography is that begging may be considered a form of legitimate *vocation*, with the usual concomitants of work, such as an activity that earns material resources, a routine with prescribed hours, a center ("office") or centers of activity, a "uniform," competent skills, a period of training or apprenticeship, and a willing clientele. Other related features include a work ethic, a sense of pride in one's work, rapport with the public, and a subjective sense of vocation.

This work recognizes that the ethnocentric beliefs and values of the dominant culture portray a beggar's life as devoid of a work ethic, and offers instead a corrective vision, from a member of that subculture, into the meanings attached to his work.

In some sense, the conclusions are ironic; in another sense, they challenge and defy the views and paradigms of the larger society in regard to work and vocation. There are features of Dan's activities that illustrate Hebdige's recognition of subcultural style as defiant and perhaps subversive (1979). Seen in this light, Dan's activities might better be interpreted as exemplary of the "rebel" type of deviant, instead of the "retreatist," using Merton's (1938) typology of deviance.

The concept of work and vocation are influenced to some degree in American society by the "work ethic." Weber (1958) identifies this type of work as a necessary precursor to capitalism, wherein work is for the purpose of accumulating money and property. As both Weber and Marx pointed out, capitalism was a radical departure from traditional ways of thinking and using resources, wherein people just worked long enough to meet their basic needs. In American society, people are socialized to embrace cultural goals of saving money for acquiring property. Although there is a concept of workaholism in American culture, the subjects who suffer from this condition are not nearly despised as are unemployed, homeless beggars. In fact, some people pride themselves on being workaholics, as if this condition were an asset instead of a liability.

The activities of Dan's work clearly militate against the spirit of capitalism and its type of work. Dan does not work at a conventional job. He does not work a forty-hour week. He does not accumulate property or pay on a home mortgage. Inasmuch as Dan's work does not meet accepted cultural definitions of work, outsiders might deny that Dan

works at all. The source of tension is not one between competing definitions, *per se*, but how those definitions are linked to differing values, some of which are subversive in character.

Secondly, I am interested in other issues and topics besides vocation and invisibility, such as dramaturgy and impression management, the disease concept of alcoholism, the ironic nature of what is intended v. what is realized, the existential features of this marginal lifestyle, and degree of criminal participation.

My work is dialogical but also interpretive. I am aware that Dan interprets his experiences in certain ways. But I am also aware that my understanding of what Dan is communicating is a result of my own interpretation, and that the finished product is a story, in some sense an artistic creation, a collaboration to some extent between anthropologist and informant. This is what I understand by Geertz' statement that "understanding of the native's point of view is like reading a poem." It is an interpretive enterprise on my part as well as Dan's. Rose (1990) advocated that anthropologists engage in "radical ethnography" that allows the ethnographer to be more creative in presentation. The dialogues that I had with Dan generated in some sense dialogues with myself, my thoughts and reactions to what I was experiencing. I have included some of these "genres" in the form of allusions to literature or poems or other thoughts. I do not think that my inclusion of such genres is radical to the extent envisioned by Rose, but I do believe that they are interpretive supplements to the ongoing dialogue. The photos I took of Dan in his camp were eventually left out for reasons of confidentiality.

THE CONTEXT OF DAN'S PLACE IN HISTORY

There are a number of issues in the area of homelessness that are beyond the scope of this work. I wish to understand the life of a particular homeless man who engaged in street corner encounters as a survival strategy. But Dan's predicament in life is couched within a larger historical and social context, and I wish to note some features of this context.

The history of tramps or hoboes as a subculture began after the Civil War in the United States (Harper 1982). Workers appeared at new job sites on the American frontier, but the work was seasonal in nature, and the workers had no intention of living a sedentary lifestyle. Thus they were mobile, moving from place to place. Features of this lifestyle included strong feelings of independence and drinking bouts. (Anderson 1923; Harper 1982). In 1922, the Committee on Homeless Men was organized in Chicago to study "the problem of the migratory casual worker" (Anderson 1923:xi). Anderson engaged in a year of fieldwork with this population and even constructed a typology of homeless men, including *seasonal worker*, *hobo* (migratory worker), *tramp* (migratory non-worker), *home guard* (non-migratory casual worker), and *bum*. He described the bum as "the most repulsive of the down-and-outs," a category which included alcoholics and drug addicts. Anderson seemed to hold the tramp in higher esteem than the others. He described the tramp as "an easy-going individual who lives from hand to mouth for the mere joy of living." Such a person had the romantic passion to explore the country and experience life without working (Anderson 1923:93). By 1938, Merton had constructed his typology of deviance and had located tramps, drunkards, and drug addicts

under the rubric Retreatists or Aliens. Such people feel defeated and are resigned to accept their fate in life. They have renounced both cultural goals and the institutional means to attain them, and, in a sense, they have escaped from society and public scrutiny (1938:677-78).

Spradley's ethnographic work (1988) was centered in Seattle in the late 1960s. He was aware that anthropologists had a unique contribution to make to social science because of their methods of data collection, which involve understanding the "native" from his own point of view. Spradley explored some of the subcultural biases that lie behind discriminatory acts directed against bums who seemed to threaten the values of the larger society.

HUD has defined a homeless person as an "unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition" who has been homeless for at least a year. For this period of time, a person must have been "sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., living on the streets)." Thus HUD includes the concept of disability in its definition, due to their special interests as a bureaucracy. The disability may be a substance abuse disorder, mental illness, or a physical disability. Although history is replete with accounts of homelessness, public awareness of the condition of homelessness in the U.S. heightened during the late 1970s-early 1980s. The word "homeless" or "homelessness" appeared for the first time in the *Social Science Index* in 1978, in *Reader's Guide* in 1980, in the *New York Times Index* in 1981, and in *Abstracts in Anthropology* in 1987. Accompanying the increase in public awareness was a number of studies being done on the homeless. Researchers explored definitions of the homeless, the identifying

characteristics or profiles of the homeless in shelters, the percentages of homeless populations in certain cities, and special problems associated with the homeless.

Brickner and Scanlan state that the most common stereotypical causes of homelessness are alcoholism, trauma, and self-neglect, yet these causes may account for only 20% of the homeless population (1990:6). Comparisons on entry data for homeless persons in a New York City shelter led to the following profiles. In the early 1960s, the typical resident at the shelter was a fifty-year old, alcoholic white male. By the late 1970s, however, the typical resident was a non-white, non-alcoholic male under the age of 40. In addition to the traditional profiles of skid row men and discharged patients from mental hospitals, the “new homeless” included women, youth, families, and the elderly. Through his analysis of data in the Atlanta area in 1988, Barak identified a profile of the average homeless person: black male, aged 30-59, high school graduate (1991:35) and also identified the shortage of affordable housing as a factor in homeless rates.

The economic trend in recent years is toward deindustrialization and a shift to service industries. Deindustrialization in the core countries, using a world systems scenario, entails less need for the manual laborer. Occupations in information technology require a work force that is highly educated. In addition, the core countries are searching for cheaper, unorganized labor, and the U.S. is exporting industry to the poorer countries, such as Mexico. The result is increasing immiseration of the American worker as well as homelessness (Susser 1996:411-12). The growing gap in wealth and income is reflected in one percent of U.S. households owning 40% of the nation’s wealth, the largest gap among nations of the western world (Glasser *et al.* 1999:156).

Thus recent models for explaining homelessness are narrowed down to two: personal pathology and structural arrangements (Glasser *et al.* 1999:144; Barak 1991:7). *Personal pathology* would include chemical addiction and the deinstitutionalization of mental illness. *Structural perspectives* would include the lack of affordable housing, the gentrification of cities, and the loss of jobs in the shift to a service economy.

Jencks (1994) reviews several theories accounting for the phenomenon of homelessness in the US. One is a *decline in the work ethic*. Jencks cites statistics that show that this decline occurred primarily in the 1960s with the youth counter-culture movement, but homelessness as a condition did not dramatically arise until the 1980s when the work ethic was more or less re-instituted as a dominant value feature of American society. Another theory is that there is an increase in joblessness *when marriage rates among men decline*. The reasoning behind this theory is as follows: when men are married, they are pressured to support their spouses and possibly children; when they are unattached, the pressure is lifted and there is less incentive to hold a job--thus the increase in homelessness. And marriage rates did decline during the 1970s and 1980s. A problem that Jencks found with this theory, however, is that long-term joblessness had increased faster with married men.

A third explanation for homelessness reviewed by Jencks concerns the concept of the *safety net*. Jencks wishes for the reader to understand that this concept involves at least three resources for it to work effectively: savings/wealth, government benefits/private pension, and help from relatives and friends. If any one of these are lacking, then there may exist an inadequate safety net. One of the problems with

government benefits, as elucidated by Susser (1996) is that of power differentials between the poor and service providers, rendering their services less effective. For example, the poor may have different concepts of time and when they miss appointments or are late, service providers may misinterpret this as an instance of the poor being unreliable or even without concepts of time. These misunderstandings foster discriminatory practices that impair service delivery.

Jencks also addresses an older theory, that of *alcoholism*, and admits that it has been a significant cause of homelessness. He compares the phenomenon of crack addiction and compares this phenomenon, which appeared in the mid-1980s, with alcohol addiction. For example, “Until the mid-1980s, the very poor had relied largely on alcohol to forget their troubles. This was not because they all found alcohol more satisfying than other mind-altering chemicals, it was just cheaper.” With the advent of crack, this cheap form of cocaine became available to the lower socio-economic classes. Because of their high potentials for addiction, both alcohol and crack account for a large number of homeless individuals.

The cultural milieu in which Dan flourished as a homeless person has a history and multiple causes. In addition, there are some public reactions, some from institutional service providers, which may militate against a more accurate understanding of what homelessness entails and the way of life for the people who experience it. Some of the “causes” of Dan’s predicament in life are relevant and some are obviously more relevant than others, e.g., alcoholism. A significant indictment against some of the poor is that they have lost their work ethic. This particular indictment may have relevance to some of

the poor, but I will argue that when directed against Dan, this charge is more apparent than real. For Dan did have an understanding of his own work ethic. The expression of this work ethic did not follow the norms of the dominant culture of which he was a member, but it was acceptable among members of a subculture. My task as an anthropologist is to understand the ways that Dan viewed his work on the street corner.

BIOGRAPHY

There are some problems associated with relying primarily on the details of a life provided by an informant. Bernard (1984) concluded that in surveys about half of what informants report is incorrect. Part of the problem is that memory decays with time, but informants will sometimes conform to cultural norms in answering specific questions. Bernard predicts that accuracy should increase if one were to rely on a key informant. In the present study, although I began my research with surveys among members of the homeless population in Waco, TX, I eventually chose to spend more time with Dan as my key informant, much like Underwood did with Jerry (1993).

Even so, the information gained from a primary informant is liable to be biased and highly subjective. I am reminded of what Dostoevsky (1864) said about the nature of biographical information: "Incidentally, Heine says that true autobiographies are almost impossible, that man is sure to lie about himself. He is certain, for example, that Rousseau had lied about himself in his confessions--had lied, in fact, deliberately, out of vanity."

The depth psychologist James Hillman (1996) does not despair at reaching some insight into the interpretation of a man's life, even if he is the primary informant: "Cover-ups and peculiar pseudologies . . . seem part of autobiography, maybe necessary to it. There seems, indeed, a curious need to falsify, disguise, or destroy the story of your life. . . . Biographical 'falsifications' belong as much to the narrative as do the 'facts.'"

I agree that one cannot accept autobiographical data at face value, at least from a historical point of view. I did attempt to verify some of the information that Dan disclosed to me by interviewing his ex-wife, daughter, and a temporary employer. Yet, even so, Dan's interpretations of his life and his life choices are just as valuable as are the strict and accurate recounting of events. For example, Dan repeatedly told me that the Air Force "taught" him how to drink, and then, three years before his retirement, it "booted" him out for his drinking. The contrast underscores the injustice inflicted on Dan, and the reasons for his choices about vocation. Of course, the Air Force does not officially train its members to drink alcoholic beverages. There is no course labeled "How to Drink Booze 101." Dan was not stating that; rather, he was communicating his belief that the Air Force did not provide enough alternatives to drinking as a leisure time activity, that the Air Force did not dissuade its members from drinking or from drinking excessively, and perhaps that the Air Force did not actively provide treatment for those who became addicted to alcohol. Thus in Dan's view, the Air Force should have accepted some responsibility for his condition, and having failed to do so, they were at fault in their ultimate decision to discharge him without honor and to withhold from him the medical and financial benefits of seventeen years' service. Thus, Dan's recounting of

the events of his life are valuable, even though they may at times be historically inaccurate, for they provide us a glimpse into his attitudes, values, and rationale for his decision to become a homeless, street beggar.

ETHICAL ISSUES

There are ethical issues involved in a study of homeless people who beg on the street. Foremost in my mind is the informant's right to privacy, and if the subject is willing to disclose information, he should be able to indicate which information should be disclosed. Source anonymity could be a guideline agreed upon by both parties.

Secondly, it is the responsibility of the interviewer to inform the respondent on how the information is to be used and how that information might impact the quality of his life or that of other members of his subculture. Even though the informant may wish to disclose certain types of information, the researcher does not have the license to divulge with impunity. The informant represents a larger aggregate whose lives could be impacted in negative ways due to the disclosure of information or of subcultural "secrets."

The issue of confidentiality, wherein only certain types of information are available for disclosure and wherein there are time constraints, was pertinent to Dan's identity and to the *location* of his camps: Day Camp and The Cane Thicket. Dan agreed that the information could be divulged if he moved from Waco or died. Since Dan's passing, however, the two sites have been bulldozed and cleaned up. On one site is building construction; on the other, preparations being made for it.

Dan was informed of the possible consequences of his divulging information before he consented. He did not care if I used his full name, although I told him that I would employ a degree of anonymity in my reports. I explained to him that he did have an ex-wife and a daughter who might wish to be protected in certain ways. I used these ethical guidelines with all informants who are mentioned in this work, although I have excised this communication from the narrative. For example, although I spoke with Lee on Easter Sunday, 1998, I spoke with him afterward to obtain his consent and initiated the same type of agreement I had formed with Dan. Accordingly, I interviewed Rick and Dan's ex-wife and daughter and presented my ethical guidelines to them before using information that they provided.

In consultation with Dan, his daughter, and his ex-wife, we arrived at the following possible damages to the well-being of their lives as a result of this study:

1. Dan's clientele might have a change of heart in regard to providing resources "out the window."
2. Dan's daughter and ex-wife might suffer from the stigma of association.

In both cases, the actors agreed that the damages would be negligible, if any, and that more could be gained by presenting this study for public scrutiny. The use of anonymity by using first names only, following the practice of Alcoholics Anonymous, was deemed sufficient as a safeguard. Anonymity is defined as the state of being unidentifiable within an aggregate of subjects. Even so, I decided, as an additional safeguard, to change the names of everyone mentioned in this ethnography.

ORGANIZATION OF ETHNOGRAPHY

This ethnography is organized around certain themes or topics, and each chapter is devoted to a topic, although certain themes overlap from one chapter to another. The chapters follow a chronological sequence of events. Most of the themes presented in this ethnography were encountered early on in my field notes, and as time progressed, I would find certain themes being repeated in conversation that had already been elucidated on prior occasions. Repetitious thematic material has therefore been excised, and the most valuable renditions of dialogue are presented in the ethnography proper.

The following themes are presented in this ethnography: the location and concept of camps and homelessness, the value of alcohol consumption in regard to work, dramaturgical style, prejudice and discrimination, chemical addiction, invisibility, kinship, participant observation, apprenticeship, and the primary theme of work and vocation.

Chapter 2: Reunion with Dan

It was nearly Spring. Temperatures were in the upper 50s. Quite windy conditions rendered a chilling effect. And I had been noticing a man begging at the intersection of Waco Drive and the I35 service road for a few days as I would drive by. He was tall, lanky, in his 40s or 50s, bearded. He stood at the median with a grin. His small dog and a blue bedroll lay beside him. He held a sign with both hands, just in front of his midsection, which read “Homeless, Need Help, God Bless! Thank You!!”

I was aware of Williams (1995) fieldwork with beggars with signs in Tucson. Williams identifies these types of beggars as panhandlers with “brother-can-you-spare-a-dime” pitches. The words on the sign convey messages, such as the moral worth of the person, the temporary nature of their predicament, and affirmations of the cultural norms of the larger, dominant society. I remembered, in the 1980s, how the signs read, “Will work for food.” Williams understood this as a con, that the beggar is implying that he subscribes to the work ethic, when, in fact, “the very success of this subterfuge reveals its falsity” (1995:37). And so I was mulling over the meaning of the messages conveyed: that of sympathy, urgency, religious sentiment, and gratitude.

The beggar was wearing faded, worn jeans and a jacket. Both were dirty. He donned a red cap from which sprung untrimmed, light brown hair. He stood slightly slumped over, conveying a sense of being a victim of the elements and perhaps of his situation in life. “Now *that’s* good acting,” I thought to myself.

I decided to observe the man from the vantage point of the convenience store nearby. I thought that I would watch him for a while and also see where he would go when retiring. I got out of my car and stood in the parking lot. Apparently, the man didn't notice me watching him. I turned to take in my surroundings. I identified the outlines of a creek bed to my left with shrubs and other vegetation. A few trees revealed newly sprouted buds. The blue skies were cloudless. I shivered for a moment and then decided to retrieve my light jacket from the car.

I returned my gaze to the man in the median. He looked down most of the time, but when motorists came into his field of vision, he appeared to look straight at them. I thought of the motorists being in a "trapped" situation, having to stop at the traffic light while the panhandler stared at them with his woeful message. And so I thought of how the traffic light served a useful function in two ways, that is, associated with the art of panhandling. First of all, the motorists are perhaps inches from the face of the beggar for what may seem to some as an eternity of discomfort. And their predicament might work to his advantage. There is sometimes a moment of reflection wherein I myself have been at the mental crossroads of whether to give or ignore. And a good salesman would exploit any ambivalence in these situations. Secondly, the pause in traffic created by the traffic control device allows motorists to contribute to the cause without upsetting the flow of traffic.

I had been observing for about ten minutes in mid-afternoon when I saw the man approach a car, take what was offered through the window, and return to his post. And while I'm writing in my notepad, a lady approached me in the parking lot.

“You see how much money they’re taking in?”

I looked at her, but didn’t reply.

She motions toward the creek area. “They have a camp back there, and they take turns out there,” motioning toward the man in the median.

I sensed that I should explain to the woman why I’m observing. “I’m engaged in research . . .”

She interrupted me, as if offering me valuable information. “They’re all alcoholics, you know.” And as I’m pondering what she had said, she wished me luck and walked away.

My interest had indeed been heightened, and I looked in the direction of the creek area where the lady told me they camped. The foliage was scanty this time of the year, but it did provide some concealment for the campers. I could make out a person standing in the camp area, and I spotted what appeared to be some article of clothing hanging from a tree limb. I wondered if the clothing were drying out from a wash perhaps or just being aired out. And I thought of cleanliness, and how difficult it must be to live out there without running water or washing machines and perhaps a change of clothes as well.

I observed the person in the camp more clearly, my attention diverted from the man in the median. This person would walk to a certain place and stop, then turn and walk back. From these motions, it appeared to me that he was simply passing the time. I could tell that the person wore pants and a knit cap. From the distance (twenty yards or so), however, I could not determine the gender or ethnicity of the person.

I had now been observing for about twenty minutes when the man in the median entered my field of vision. He had left his post and was walking briskly toward the camp. When he reached the camp, he unzipped his pants and urinated. If motorists had been looking in the direction of the camp, they might have noticed. Yet no one seemed to notice but me. Within a minute, he was walking briskly back to the median to his waiting dog and bedroll. He resumed his posture to passing motorists as before. The trip to the “bathroom” took about two minutes. And if I had been distracted for this length of time or had gone inside the convenience store, I would have missed it. I remember thinking, “Damn, that’s efficient!” And I was already toying with the idea that perhaps the man viewed his post at the median as his “office” and passing motorists as possible “clientele,” metaphors that Underwood had used in his conversations with his informant (1993:1).

I looked again in the direction of the camp and imagined how the creek area might appear during the later spring and summer months when the foliage would be more developed and thicker. I predicted that this vegetation would provide a perfect visual barrier to the outside world, a mere thirty yards from a major thoroughfare in a city exceeding 100,000 citizens.

My attention returned to the man in the median. After about forty-five minutes of observation time, the man approached his third “client” and took what was offered. No words appeared to have been exchanged. The man promptly stored his prize in his right front pocket of his pants.

I decided to take a break from observing and entered the convenience store to meet and talk to the clerk. This was a high-crime area, and he might be suspicious of my lingering in the parking lot. And I thought that perhaps he could provide some information about his neighbors in the camp. I approached the clerk, explained to him what I was doing, and asked if I could park my car in his lot. The man was friendly, and he consented. He introduced himself as “Shims.” He admitted that he’d been observing me for the past thirty minutes or so, and he was glad that I explained what I was doing and was somewhat relieved, after talking to me, that my presence was legitimate.

Shims remarked that the people in the camp came in regularly to buy beer and tobacco. He stated that sometimes certain ones would attempt to steal items from his store, but he said that he was unconcerned about it, because when such thefts occurred he only had to approach the man in the median about it, and the man would resolve this recurring issue by having the culprit pay Shims and by warning the offender from the area. And from this information provided by Shims, I construed that the man in the median was a sort of boss of the camp and had some authority over other camp members. I also theorized that one or both of the following were true about the man in the median: (1) that he respected the property rights of others, and/or (2) that he did not wish to jeopardize his access to this camp which was actually situated on private property.

I had been speaking with Shims for a couple of minutes while glancing periodically toward the man in the median, I saw him walking toward the camp, clutching his bedroll, with his dog following him. When he was halfway to the camp, he met the person in the camp who was coming to meet him. I noticed that a backpack was strapped

to this person. Obviously, both of the persons had participated in some type of communication for this meeting to take place, but in my distraction with Shims, I had missed it altogether. This other person, whom I could now identify as being white, or Caucasian, took the other's place on the median. But instead of standing, he sat down on his backpack while holding a different cardboard sign.

When I exited the store, I began walking in the direction of the camp, for I had decided to introduce myself to the street beggar. But I stopped, because the man had emerged from his camp just as quickly as he had entered it and was approaching the store. And so I waited for him to reach me and then introduced myself. Surprisingly, he knew me. He said that he recognized me as his instructor in a DWI repeat offender course that he had taken in 1995. He even called me by name. He was friendly and appeared to be perfectly at ease talking to me. In fact, the more we talked, I realized that he was glad to see me again.

Dan walked with a steady, sure gait. Aside from the red cap atop his head, he wore a couple of t-shirts, a pair of faded jeans with spots of white paint, a pair of old, athletic shoes, and a long, tan coat with large pockets at his hips. Dan's goatee was fairly long; he was not clean-shaven. His untrimmed, brown hair was visible from the sides of his cap. He looked in his 50s, his wrinkled, brown face betraying his exposure to the weather. He had a relaxed smile with dingy teeth. I thought that his eyes revealed years of suffering.

Personally, I could not recall any memory of him, and I told him so. But he described the curriculum and my teaching style with such precision, that I had no doubts of us having met in this way.

And so I must elaborate on this DWI course of which the man spoke. It is dubbed the Texas DWI Intervention Program, initiated in the early 1990s under the auspices of the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse for repeat DWI offenders. The course is taught (preferably) by a licensed counselor. (I have been a Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor since 1992.) It consists of fifteen classes of two hours duration apiece as well as three individual sessions. The program usually lasts two months. The curriculum includes information about changing one's lifestyle in order to combat DWI behavior, and it assumes that most class participants are alcoholics. Participants engage in class discussions, homework, and AA participation. During "Family Week," they are required to bring a spouse or other close family member or friend. The topics during Family Week include the dysfunctional family and codependency, and family members are able to participate in class discussions. Other topics in the curriculum include exercises in cognitive therapy, positive thinking, enhancement of self-esteem, problem resolution, leisure time activities, physical exercise and nutrition, stress reduction, and relapse prevention techniques. These classes are held in Waco at the county probation office where a policeman patrols the halls.

The man in the median re-introduced himself as "Dan." I detected the odor of an alcoholic beverage on his breath right away. I asked him if I could buy him a beer, and he consented, but requested a forty-ounce Magnum. "It costs \$1.07," he added, "I'll just

wait out here for you.” And I sensed that Dan preferred not to enter the store if he could avoid it. Perhaps he was sensitive to how the store’s more conventional patrons might receive him or the store’s clerk. Perhaps he only entered the store when absolutely necessary, in deference to others.

Of course, I had some motivation “for” and “against” buying booze for Dan. As an alcohol counselor, I am aware that alcoholism is potentially fatal and that I could be contributing to his eventual demise, perhaps in the same sense that one might buy cigarettes for someone who might contract lung cancer or emphysema. A reason for buying beer for Dan is related to establishing rapport with a prospective informant. I surmised that he would place a great deal of value on alcoholic beverages, and my assumption was correct. Providing Dan with something that he considered valuable was an excellent way to build rapport with him. Additionally, deaths from alcohol withdrawal in its most extreme form (DT’s) are statistically larger than for any other mood-altering substance. Obviously, Dan was not “in recovery,” and therefore I was not contributing to a “relapse.” Dan was active in his addiction, by personal choice. He would have bought the beer (as he confirmed later) with or without my aid. If a person is active in his addiction and is experiencing DT’s, then alcohol consumption will forestall the symptoms and perhaps forestall death as well, the practice being referred to in some circles as “a little hair of the dog that bit ya.” Yet despite my rationalizations, I must admit that I experienced some ambivalence over my offer and continued to do so on other occasions as well.

I returned from the store with the offering and handed it to Dan who graciously accepted the gift, and allowed me to enter his camp. I followed Dan to the creek area where his camp was located. The creek was dry, with the exception of a few pockets of standing water here and there. Dan lamented that the pools bred mosquitoes, one of the banes of camp life. As I entered the camp, Dan's dog began barking, but my apprehensions were relieved when I noted the chain-leash tied to a tree, restricting the dog's movements. Dan commanded "Tia" to stop barking, and she complied immediately, while I wondered about the pros and cons of having a pet in a homeless camp.

I can think of a number of difficulties that a homeless person might experience in having a pet. Not having a permanent residence that one rents or owns can work to one's disadvantage when one needs to go to places and buildings or receive services where pets are forbidden. And if the pet is tied down, it is usually on public or private property (not one's own), and there is no assurance that the pet will be there when one returns. If the homeless person is struggling to support or feed himself, having a pet could create an extra burden. And it is unlikely that a homeless pet owner would take his pet regularly to a vet for vaccinations and checkups, which negligence works to the pet's disadvantage. On a positive note, dogs can provide protection in risky, perhaps dangerous, environments. Sometimes the "protection" takes the form of what I would call "warning barks." And pets can provide comradeship in lonely conditions, and some studies have indicated that regularly petting an animal is an excellent technique for reducing stress.

"This is Tia. Do you know what Tia means in Spanish?" asked Dan.

“Hmm. I think it means aunt, doesn’t it?”

“Yep. It means aunt.”

I was curious if Dan knew the Spanish language. “Why did you name her Tia? Do you know Spanish?”

Dan looked at me with a grin and replied, “I didn’t name her. She was named by someone else. Fred--he gave her to me when he went to the hospital.”

“So how long have you had her, Dan?”

“Three months.”

“So, Dan, are you supposed to keep her? Did Fred give her to you to keep? Or are you just keeping Tia for him until some later time?”

“I’ll keep her. He might want her back, but I doubt it,” Dan answered, unconcerned with the tension I was feeling about ownership of pets or property. And this is a bias of mine: I need to know what belongs to whom, unequivocally; otherwise, I feel ill-at-ease. In nomadic Kung society, property is shared and there is less discomfort in the possibility of not knowing what belongs to whom. In a sense, homeless people, due perhaps to being stripped of most of their property, may participate, on some level, in sharing behavior and a suspension of ownership issues.

“Does she bite?”

“I keep her chained to a tree right now, because she’s in heat,” explained Dan, as he sat down on an upturned bucket. “Wanna sit? You can sit on this one,” offered Dan, as he pointed to a nearby, dirty bucket. I accepted the “seat” graciously and wondered if I would pick up anything undesirable in the process.

As we reached a lull in conversation, I viewed my surroundings. There were at least a hundred beer bottles strewn about the creek and camp area, along with other forms of rubbish, such as an old pair of cowboy boots. As I sank into my surroundings, I concluded that the trees and brush provided some protection from the chilling wind.

“So Dan, did you have any luck out there? I noticed that you approached three cars.”

“They’re called *licks*,” Dan corrected me. “Made \$12 out the window.”

“So how much do you usually make in a day?”

“Anywhere from \$20 to \$50. Some days are better than others. Mondays are the worst, ‘cause people are upset about having to go back to work.”

“What days are the best?”

“Fridays through Sundays are the best, ‘cause people are in a good mood about being off work. And ‘cause they just got paid! Look, she just got her third lick!” Dan was referring to the person who now stood at the median. I had been talking to Dan with my back to her, and I didn’t even notice her interaction with motorists. And I was a bit surprised to learn that she was a woman. The garb and gait had not exposed her identity to me before now. I noted the time. An hour had elapsed since I began observing.

“What’s her name?”

“That’s Donna.” Dan looked at me and grinned. “She’s not my girlfriend and doesn’t sleep here.”

“Okay.” I paused so that Dan would continue.

“She’s been coming here nearly every day for about a month. She rides her bike over here. But once she gets about \$10 she goes back to her own camp.”

“Where is her camp?”

“She lives near the Ferrell Center.” The Ferrell Center is located on the Baylor University campus.

“How old is she?”

“40, 41.” He paused as if uncertain.

Dan apologized for the trashy appearance of the camp. “I always collect my bottles, put ‘em in a plastic bag and throw ‘em in a dumpster, behind Sam’s.” Dan was referring to the Sam’s Club store located just on the other side of I35, about a half-mile away. “The other people who come to my camp leave their bottles laying around.”

“Where do you use the bathroom?” I remembered watching Dan earlier urinate in camp.

Dan pointed to a grassy knoll five yards away. “I do it on the other side.” Dan meant the other side of the creek. One of the reasons I wanted to know this is so that I wouldn’t inadvertently traverse the area.

“Dan, what do you call your activity out there on the median? Is it called panhandling, begging, or what?”

“It’s called *flying the sign*. But you can do without a sign. I used to.”

I looked at Dan as if expecting more information. I noted that since I had begun interviewing Dan, he would always look me straight in the eyes, with a relaxed look and

usually a slight grin. I wondered how Dan could appear to be cheerful in his surroundings.

“I used to walk through parking lots and ask people for money. I don’t do that anymore. You can make better money flying signs. There’s another lick! That’s her fourth!” Dan had been splitting his concentration between Donna and me, but he appeared not to miss anything. I recalled that today was a Friday, a “good day” to receive donations, according to Dan.

“So what is a lick?”

“A *lik* is when you get something out the window.”

“So if Donna receives some money, then she’s getting a lick out the window?”

“Yeah.” Dan grinned again as if pleased that I was catching on.

Dan began expertly rolling a cigarette, using Bugler tobacco. I decided to turn and watch Donna at work. She continued to sit on her backpack. Every now and then she would stand up, approach a car, as if on queue, and receive a donation of some kind. I could not tell if any words were being exchanged. Then Donna would return to the median and sit on her backpack.

“There’s another. That’s her fifth!” exclaimed Dan. I wondered how counting licks could help Dan pass the time.

In my conversation with Dan, he did not appear to be inebriated, and he did not drink while I was there. I noticed him place the bottle I had bought him to the side when we first arrived at his camp. Dan seemed to be in full control of his mental processes and adequately alert. His eyes were kind, and he seemed delighted to be interviewed about

his lifestyle. For the next hour, Dan and I were content to watch Donna on the median. During this time, she got four more licks, then walked off the median just to our side and retrieved a bicycle lying there that had escaped my notice. She waved at Dan and rode away.

Dan waved back and remarked, “She leaves when she gets \$10.”

For the next three hours, Dan and I spoke of the DWI Intervention Class that he had attended three years ago. Dan was able to recall certain details from comments I had made in the class, and I was amazed that he could recall them with such clarity and precision. I asked Dan if I could return to his camp and talk with him some more. He replied, “Sure. I’ll be here,” and grinned. Even though I was a little squeamish about it, I shook Dan’s hand and thanked him. As soon as I returned to my car, I wiped my hands with some wet towelettes. I feared catching some type of disease or carrying home some type of parasite. And before I sat in my car, I brushed off the seat of my pants.

Chapter 3: Day Camp

On Sunday, March 22, the weather conditions reinforced the idea of the first of the spring season. Midmorning winds were light and variable, and it was warmer than my first visit to camp. There was an absence of chill in the air. It was sunny and cloudless. I parked my car in the same parking lot adjacent to the convenience store and to Dan's camp. I walked in the direction of camp and finally saw Dan seated on a bucket. Tia, his dog, was tied to a tree.

Dan was the first to speak. "Hello!" He grinned as usual. I noticed that he was alone. "Have a seat!" I saw the bucket that I had sat on two days ago at the same place, and I wondered how many people had sat on the bucket since then. As I sat down, I asked Dan if he would help me review my notes from our first meeting, and he seemed curious about what I had written. He consented to help. After reviewing my typed notes, Dan seemed pleased with the product and with my attention to detail. When transcribing taped recordings, the sounds are sometimes distorted due to winds and other distracting noises, and it was crucial that Dan help me remember details.

It took a full two hours to go over the notes and to process thoughts and feelings about what was recorded.

Dan offered his first advice of the day: "The homeless have a code. We respect each other. When we approach a camp, we announce ourselves, 'Ahoy in the Camp! Dan! Incoming!' That way you don't catch 'em off guard, 'cause some of 'em carry

guns and knives!” Dan yelled out the words of warning as if he were recreating the event for me. I had the sensation of attending some type of training seminar.

I nodded. “So I would say, ‘Ahoy in the camp! Floyd! Incoming!’?”

“Yeah, that’s it. It shows respect. You don’t want to upset ‘em.”

“Why would they be upset, Dan?”

“People mistreat you sometimes when you’re a tramp.”

“Like who, Dan?”

“Cops. Mostly cops.”

I thought about something Jerry said in Underwood’s ethnography (1993:4):

She asked in a matter-of-fact way if there was a law against panhandling. . . . “You’re damn right there is.” [Jerry] quickly shoved his cap out of sight behind him against the wall. He said he’d been arrested numerous times, but not for panhandling *per se*. “If they want to arrest you, they can. They’ll find something to charge you with.”

“Do the police harass you, Dan?”

“I get harassed by the police sometimes. I was handcuffed yesterday and the rookie cop was going to take me in for soliciting without a license. But I told him that I only put on my sign ‘Need Help,’ not ‘Give Me Help.’ I told ‘em that I’m just commenting on my conditions and that’s not soliciting. But he was going to take me in anyway.” Dan paused and grinned.

“Did you go to jail?”

“I said to ‘em, ‘What about my bedroll?’ He said that I’d have to leave it. So I protested that this was my property and that if he’s gonna take me to jail, then he’d have to take my property too.” Dan paused and grinned.

“So what did he say to that?”

“I asked him about my dog. He said that I’d have to leave my dog. Then I said, ‘Look, don’t you guys have something better to do than arrest homeless people? What about the real criminals out there?’” Dan paused again.

“So he backed down after you told him that?”

“Well, it seemed to work, ‘cause he let me go. Then he warned me not to fly on his shift. Said I’d have to wait till 2:45 [p.m.].” Dan began rolling a cigarette.

“A bit territorial, would you say?”

“But that don’t sound right to me. If it’s wrong, it’s wrong all the time, ain’t it?”

“Hmm. I can’t argue with that.”

“Well, I gotta go fly the sign some. You leaving?”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll just sit here and watch.”

“Okay. Anything else you wanna know before I go out there?”

“Uh, yeah. Where do you sleep here?”

“I don’t. This is Day Camp. I sleep somewhere else where it’s safer.”

“Where’s that?”

“I’ll show you sometime. On the other side of the highway. That’s where I sleep.” Dan motioned in the direction of I35.

“Okay!” I was taking in what Dan had just said. I had assumed that he stayed in this camp all of the time and spent the night here.

Dan started for the median and then looked back and said, “I come over here to fly the sign. That’s all. I live over there. You gonna be here awhile?”

“Yeah. I’ll wait for you to get back.”

“I’m gonna leave Tia and my bedroll then.”

“Okay.” And I wondered how often a near-propertyless tramp gets ripped off while begging on a street corner. And I thought how important one’s property would be if he only had enough property to carry with him. I assumed that Dan had other property stashed away at his home camp, but that probably he took his most valuable possession with him—his bed—so that he would have it when he needed it. Or perhaps he might change his mind about where he would spend the night and wouldn’t wish to return to home camp to retrieve his bedroll.

Dan then grinned and resumed his walk to the median. I looked at my watch. It was mid-afternoon.

For the next hour and a half, Dan flew the sign just as he had done two days before. During this time, a total of 79 vehicles passed by Dan, and the light changed to red, stopping traffic, forty-eight times. Dan got eight licks during this time.

Around 4:00 p.m., Dan came back to camp, unzipped his pants and yelled, “Pit stop!” Then he returned to the median. I noticed that Dan did not urinate in his “bathroom” that he had pointed out to me two days ago. Apparently, Dan did not have a special place to urinate.

For the next forty-five minutes or so, Dan flew the sign and took in four licks. On the fourth, I could see Dan getting some large object from the motorist, and I could hear them exchanging words with one another. Dan then hurried back to camp. I could see that Dan was carrying a box of Church’s Chicken, and he had a wide grin on his face.

“Look what I made out the window--supper!”

Dan sat down while Tia woke up and looked intently at him.

“Want some? I got okra and Cole slaw too. I can’t eat Cole slaw. It messes up my stomach.”

“No thanks. Go ahead and eat.”

Dan gave Tia a wing who grabbed it in her jaws and went to the far side of the tree to eat it. I watched Dan eat for a few moments and then realized that I might be intruding into his privacy. Tia certainly wanted her distance while she ate. It’s instinctual, and it has survival value. Dan was definitely living a life wherein survival was a constant issue.

“I think I’ll call it a day, Dan.”

“Coming back? Or had enough?”

“Oh, I’ll be back. Hey, thanks for helping me with my field notes. I probably won’t see you until next weekend, though.”

Dan nodded. “See ya then. Sure you don’t want some of this? I can’t eat it all.”

“Oh yeah, I’m not really hungry. But thanks anyway. Enjoy your meal and I’ll see you later, okay?”

“All right.”

As I walked to my car, I thought about my own eating habits, being vegetarian. And I thought about the possible exchange of conversation that might have taken place if when Dan offered me the chicken I had replied that I was vegetarian. Although my food choices are a stable aspect of my daily lifestyle and even of my identity, I wondered how

a lifestyle of being homeless and begging on street corners might lead to a change in food preferences. If I lived more in a survival mode, how important would my vegetarianism be? And with that question I had plenty to think about as I drove the eighteen miles to my home.

Chapter 4: Work and Drink I

On Friday, March 27, it was raining lightly but steadily, and it was warm. Temperatures were in the upper 70s. The wind was as strong as the first time I had met Dan, but there was no chill. Spring was well on its way in Waco. I pulled into the parking lot where I usually parked my car, but I could not see anyone at Day Camp. As I was walking toward the creek area, I remembered Dan's warning about introducing myself as a visitor. So I stopped about halfway along the trail and called out, "Ahoy in the camp! Floyd here! Incoming!" I felt a bit awkward about this, but there was no response and I could see no one. I was cautious as I approached closer.

The camp was still littered with rubbish, mostly empty beer bottles and paper. The area was muddy from the rain. There was no one in sight. The buckets used for sitting had been turned over, possibly from the wind. I was glad that I had worn dilapidated tennis shoes and a light windbreaker. I stood for a few moments and looked around for anything unusual. I wondered if Dan was out for the day because of the rain or if he would show up. It was mid-afternoon. The traffic was becoming heavier, and I decided to sit and wait.

I thought of how time and the future might have different meanings for a homeless person who flies the sign for a living. And I remembered Liebow's description of street-corner men, how the middle-class observer sees them as having a present time orientation, an inability to defer gratification, irresponsible, and refusing work when offered. To the middle-class man, however, his so-called "future orientation" assumes a

surplus of resources. Without such resources, the street-corner man is discouraged from investing in anything permanent (1967:60-70). I wondered about this irony: there is the romantic notion of the hobo or tramp experiencing absolute freedom--freedom from work, bills, and other obligations. Yet, in a sense, the hobo is trapped: resources gone and dependent on his daily lick out the window.

*There was something in the air
That makes us bow our heads;
We want to pray for prisoners
For whom life stops.
And we think of life stopped. . . .*

*Of life no longer moving towards death
And of where the future's absent;
Where one must be uselessly strong
And sad, uselessly.*

*Where all days are marking time,
Where all nights fall into the abyss,
And where childhood's intimate awareness
Effaces itself at that point*

*When our heart's too old to think a child.
It's not so much that life is hostile,
But that we lie to it,
Locked in a block of immobilized fate. (Rilke 1986)*

As I continued to ponder these things, I heard the familiar ring of a friend's voice, for I had come now to think of Dan as a friend.

"Ahoy in the camp! Incoming!" The words were spoken with humor. Dan was following the footpath from the convenience store. He was carrying his backpack, as usual. It was late afternoon.

"Hey! Where's Tia?"

Dan continued to walk without answering. As he entered the camp boundaries, he spoke, looking at me squarely in my eyes, with his own eyes of goodwill. He grinned, as usual. Dan appeared to have all of his teeth. They were dingy, to be sure, but they all seemed to be intact. Part of his unkempt moustache covered the upper part of his mouth.

“Left ‘er with some friends. Had diarrhea.”

“Whom did you leave her with?”

“The McCoys. They live in Bellmead [a suburb of Waco].”

“Are they homeless?” I asked.

“They have a home in Bellmead. Stayed there last night. They’re good people.”

I made a note to ask Dan about his support network in the future, but thought it better not to delve into a discussion at this time, for we needed to review the field notes from our last meeting. This took about an hour and forty-five minutes. Dan again showed some interest in my notes and also in my interpretations. After we were through, I asked Dan about his work.

“So Dan--do you have to work on rainy days?” I spoke with a touch of humor, and Dan picked up on it and laughed.

“Nah. Don’t hafta. I can do what I want. I like this life. It’s not what I imagined twenty years ago.”

“So if you didn’t have to work today, why are you here in this drizzle?”

“Good day to fly the sign. Lots of licks. People getting paid, feeling good, charitable, you know.”

“I see. So you just can’t pass up working today?”

“Shouldn’t. Might get some supper.”

“Dan, you said that twenty years ago you had aspirations for some other type of work?”

“I was in the Air Force for seventeen years and got booted out. No benefits. The Air Force taught me how to drink. Then they booted me out for it.” Dan was not grinning, which was unusual.

“Tell me about your life in the Air Force.”

“I joined in 1970. In 1986 I pulled a two-week drunk and didn’t show up for work. I was court-martialed in Sacramento. Spent three months in jail, and then they gave me an ‘Other than Honorable Discharge.’ After seventeen years!” I sensed that Dan still harbored ill feelings about how the Air Force sanctioned him.

“When could you have retired?”

“Three years!”

“Dan, what about VA benefits?”

“I don’t get any. They gave me an ‘Other’ than Honorable Discharge, which means that they don’t have to give me any benefits. I could have fought it, but it was too much trouble and you gotta wait forever and fill out a bunch of paper crap.”

“It just wasn’t worth it? How hard did you try? Wouldn’t the effort be worth the benefits that you’d receive?”

“I’ve tried to have it [the discharge] upgraded twice, but it didn’t work. I was an E-6, Technical Sergeant.”

“You said that the Air Force taught you how to drink?”

“Yeah. That’s what everybody did when they got off work every day. Went to the NCO Club. Shoot pool and drink till you got wasted. That’s the only social life you have overseas or in the military.”

“Tell me how you started drinking.”

“Started when I was seventeen. I graduated from high school in North Carolina—1970—and joined the Air Force. I went sober for six fucking months with my wife. This was in 1973. I never drank socially—I drank for the effects. But later I started drinking to avoid DT’s. This was in 1986 when I was kicked out of the Air Force.”

I asked Dan to stop a moment while I took out my tape and put in another.

“In 1982-1983 I was stationed in Kwangju, South Korea, and I started drinking Soju, a rice liquor. It was 180 proof. I started drinking it with Coke [Coca-Cola], but before I left I was drinking it straight. I’m still bitter with the Air Force about this.”

“So although you started drinking at the age of seventeen, when you went into the Air Force, your problems didn’t start until about twelve years later?”

“Well, my ex-wife would disagree, but yeah, about then. I didn’t drink any more than anyone else starting out. Everybody drank to get drunk after work. Before my discharge, I got used to drinking a quart of Crown Royal a day. That’s the whiskey made by Seagram’s. It comes in one of those velvety bags with a drawstring.”

I thought about how packaging contributes to psychological addiction. This type of addiction, which is not physiological, entails obsessions and cravings. When psychological and physiological addictions are combined, one finds it very difficult to resist using alcohol.

“But when I got out of the Air Force, I couldn’t afford Crown Royal anymore, at \$25 a day, so in 1986 I started drinking white port, which is like Night Train. So, for two years I’m drinking this until I come to Waco. When I got here, everyone was drinking Thunderbird, Mad Dog 20/20, and vodka. About three years ago, they started drinking beer, so I did too. I used to drink a whole bottle of Listerine on Sunday mornings before noon.”

“Why would you drink Listerine? Yuck!”

“Takes away DT’s. If you don’t stock up, you gotta have something.”

Dan appeared tired of talking and stood up and stretched. “I gotta get some licks. You wanna watch? You know, if you really want to know what it’s like, you gotta do it yourself.”

I listened to Dan’s words, but their import didn’t really sink in. I just nodded.

“I’m serious, Floyd. You need to fly the sign. Then you’ll see what it’s like.”

Dan was scratching his left arm through his shirt and was looking in the direction of the median.

“Uh, I’ll have to think about that one. Wow. Hmm. Okay, maybe later. I’m not sure I can do it.”

“Anybody can do it.” Dan grinned and began walking toward the median. I noted the time as being 7:00 p.m.

For the next hour, Dan flew his sign and got eight licks. Twice during this time he looked back at me and appeared to grin. Returning to camp, he first urinated with his

back to me, partially concealed from the street by a small tree. When he was finished, he walked over, sat down on his bucket, and began rolling a cigarette.

“How much did you make?”

“I made \$16 out the window.”

“How many licks did you get? I counted eight.”

“Yeah. Eight licks, that’s right. You counted right.’ Dan grinned.

I mentally calculated that Dan made an average of \$2 per lick.

Dan said that he was going to his home camp across I35 and invited me. I replied that I would try to find him there sometime, but that I had to go for now. Dan described how to get there. And with that, I departed. The wind and rain had let up, but the ground was soggy, and the air was humid. The temperature had dropped to the lower 70s.

Chapter 5: Hollywood and Ethics

Lizbeth and I walked far out on the reentry ramp where we could be seen both by cars on the highway and by those leaving the rest stop. . . . Once again we were picked up by a vehicle I had not noticed until it stopped. I always tried to make as much eye contact with the drivers of approaching vehicles as possible, but I do not believe I stared down a single ride (Eighner 1992).

It was Sunday, March 29. The early afternoon wind was gusty on a cloudless day. I spotted Dan on the median, waved at him as I passed by, made a U-turn, and doubled back to the convenience store to park. I looked in the direction of the camp, but could see no one stirring about. I went into the store to see if Shims were there. I met Ali instead, a slightly older man, standing behind the counter. I introduced myself to him and informed him of why I was there and received permission to park. Ali's English was more broken than Shims'. He was friendly, but he has a difficult time understanding why I would want to study Dan and those in his camp.

I bought a forty-ounce Magnum for Dan and a twenty-four ounce Bud Ice for me. Before heading down the path to the camp, I retrieved a large bucket I had brought from home. The temperature was in the lower 80s. Dan and Tia were waiting for me.

"Ahoy in the camp! Floyd incoming!" I still felt a little awkward saying this, but Dan seemed to appreciate it.

"Hey, Floyd. Come on in!" answered Dan.

"I brought this. Thought you might want it for another seat," I explained, as I set the bucket on the ground upside down.

"Yeah, set it right there. Have a seat. I made \$18 today already," added Dan.

I told Dan that I just met Ali.

“Yeah, he’s Shims’ father-in-law. Sometimes they ask me to talk to other guys to get them in line, as if *I’m* supposed to do that. That’s not *my* job. It’s *their* store. I have spoken to a couple of guys when they really needed it, but I don’t like to do that.”

I remembered the conversation I had with Shims on March 20. “Maybe they think that this is your camp and that you’re in charge of what goes on in it.”

“It *is* my camp. I’ve been flying this corner for seven months now. I used to fly at Fifth Street. And I have regular customers. One black guy hands me a dollar every day when he’s on his way to work. He comes from the other direction. But I don’t tell other bums what to do. If they steal something, then that’s not *my* problem. It’s the problem of the store owners, not me. If they steal from *me*, then it is my problem.”

“I see what you mean.” I handed Dan the Magnum, and he thanked me for it and set it to the side. I opened mine and took a sip. I asked Dan if he would help me review my field notes from our last session. We spent nearly two hours on the notes. I knew afterward what I wanted to interview Dan about today.

“Dan, I want to know about your techniques of getting licks out the window. Can you share them with me?”

“You mean my Hollywood?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I mean. I guess I have a lot of terms to learn that are unfamiliar to me.”

“That’s part of what you need to learn. I had to learn it.”

Dan opened the Magnum I had given him and took a sip. I asked him to elaborate on his “Hollywood” techniques. I recalled a passage from Orwell’s account in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which is reproduced here:

While I was with Bozo he taught me something about the technique of London begging. . . . The amounts that one can earn by the different ‘gags’ also vary. The stories in the Sunday papers about beggars who die with two thousand pounds sewn into their trousers are, of course, lies. . . . All these people are frankly beggars, exploiting an appearance of misery.

“Look, I’m talking straight up. I’m happy now. But when I’m flying the sign I look sad. I look ‘poor, poor, pitiful me,’ ‘cause when I’m out there, it’s my bread and butter, you know.”

“Okay, go on.”

“Now I’m talking to you straight up. When you fly the sign you gotta roll in the dirt and wear tattered clothes.” Dan showed me the tears in his jacket sleeves. “See? This jacket’s perfect. If you wear nice clothes, everybody will just pass you by. But if you really want to know what it’s like to fly the sign, then I suggest you stay out here one time, spend the night, and fly the sign. Otherwise, you’ll never really know what it’s like.”

“Okay, I’ll think about that. But go on, tell me more about Hollywood.”

“I see you got a beard, and that’s good, but it’s too clean-cut. See? Look at mine, how it’s running everywhere. You’d need about two months’ growth before flying the sign. This is part of what makes me money. I make good money, and it’s tax free.”

“Okay.”

“And I use Tia, of course, as a prop cause people feel sorry for a dog.”

“Oh, yeah.” I thought it interesting that Dan would use a theatrical term, *prop*, to designate Tia’s place in the activity.

“And you gotta take whatever they offer you ‘cause it makes ‘em feel good, and it helps the next person who’s going to fly behind you.”

“So you have an ethical code that you follow in your life’s work?”

“Yeah, we have a code. Homeless people look out for each other, except some. We watch each other’s backs ‘cause we’re all in the same boat. I’m not a greedy person. I freely give like it was given to me. I help others, and it makes a circle.”

“So you always give to others?”

“No, not always. Like today, JR and Lucy hit me up for a dollar. But I didn’t give it to ‘em ‘cause it’s a matter of principle. He sends her out flying the sign and he sits down. That’s not right. If he was flying too, I’d of given him a dollar.”

“I understand.”

“I was on food stamps once, when I was at New Hope [Ministries]. But I’d sell ‘em for booze. Alcohol comes *first*. Then me. No. Then Tia. Then me.”

“What about eye contact as a technique?”

“I look ‘em straight in the eye, ‘cause I want them to know I’m not staggering drunk. If they think you’re drunk, they don’t give you nothing. And if it looks like it’s going to rain, I’ll look up at the sky.” Dan looked up as if he were recreating the event.

“And then I look back at them, and then up at the sky, and back at them. That’s Hollywood, you know. Now, I’m telling you this straight up ‘cause you want to know about all this, so I’m telling you.”

“What about the wording on your sign? I used to see words on signs like ‘Will Work for Food,’ and now I see a large variety of different words and phrases, like ‘Stranded, Viet Nam Vet, etc.’”

“Right now I say, ‘Homeless, Hungry, Need Help, God Bless, Thank You.’ I used to say, ‘Need Work,’ but then they are trying to get me jobs and you can’t drink on the job.”

“Oh yeah, so you can’t work on a job if they don’t allow it.”

“I don’t have to fly, but it’s in my blood. I always pray before I go out there, that God will send the right cars by. I always make at least \$17 on this corner. The most I ever made here was \$75.”

“Do you feel guilty sometimes about using ‘Hollywood’ to make money?”

“No. People want to feel good by giving. I make it easier for them. Good salesmen use ‘Hollywood’ too, you know. I’m no different. And I don’t just spend the money on booze, like I said. I buy food for me and Tia.”

I looked at my watch. It was around 6:45 p.m. “Are you going to fly any more today, Dan?”

“Nope. I got \$18. That’s all I need.”

I thanked Dan for another session and wished him well.

As I drove away, I thought of parallels with Dan’s Hollywood and some things Hebdige (1979) said about subcultural style, e.g., that “mundane objects . . . take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile.” And I pictured Dan wearing tattered clothing and rolling in the dirt and sporting an unkempt

beard. These are mundane objects, but in the arena of “flying the sign” they communicate more than clothing or the fact that they need mending or washing or that Dan should practice personal hygiene. They are symbolic of a condition deserving sympathy. They communicate to passing motorists: “Hey, look how life has dealt me a bad hand. I’m on hard times. I’m miserable. Look at the contrast between you and me. Be merciful and kind and, above all, be generous.” Yes, these mundane objects are gravid with these meanings and more. These tokens of a self-imposed exile correspond to Goffman’s disclosure of stigma symbols (1963:100). One way to control information is through disclosure of stigma symbols in a highly visible way. In Dan’s case, he is using clothing, personal hygiene, signs, postures, and behaviors as symbolic of stigma. One might say that he embellishes these symbols for the sake of his “Hollywood,” and in so doing he embraces the stigma of being a homeless beggar, which assures his survival but also discredits him at the same time.

As a result of his fieldwork with New York City and Tucson beggars, Williams viewed beggars as vendors who are selling something, but would not go so far as to posit that this was a type of work. In fact, he denies that work is taking place at all (1995:37). He identified two styles of begging which correspond with two types of beggars. The first is the “character beggar” who performs a one-act play. The beggar may play a musical instrument or provide information about the weather, for example. The second type of beggar is the panhandler, such as the type who brandishes a sign at street corners. This type of beggar does not have the time for audible messages or performances. Williams identifies the symbols being conveyed in such pitches but fails to appreciate, to

some extent, the performance. It is true that these beggars are usually silent, but the performance is there, as Dan could testify regarding his “Hollywood.”

Hebdige (1979) remarks that there is a tension between the ideals and values of dominant versus subordinate groups, and the “mundane objects” that Dan sported are also symbols of defiance and contempt and are subversive in nature. This corresponds with Gans’ analysis of “displaced threats,” wherein members of the dominant society fear that their own way of life is threatened and therefore project these fears onto those who apparently flaunt the system (Gans 1994).

But there is also a meaning of defiance and contempt held by those who “fly the sign” which is different than that interpreted by the larger masses. For Dan, his vocation and the satisfaction he would have gotten from achieving retirement status were rendered null and void by a branch of the armed forces of his county. The injustice was inflicted by a court representing the Air Force, and the Air Force, in turn, represented and was consonant in purpose and design with the larger society of which it was a part. Thus Dan could get some satisfaction in flaunting the vocational aspirations of the dominant society that took away his existing vocational status. Dan’s choice of homelessness can only be partially explained by his addiction to alcohol. What is overlooked is his failure to achieve his vocational goals, and his belief that he was only partially responsible for this failure.

And as I drove home, I remember thinking that perhaps I should let my beard grow untrimmed for a few months.

Chapter 6: Fear and Loathing in Waco

Gans (1995) identifies *fear* as the primary emotion associated with those who label certain populations as “undeserving.” This fear stems from a perceived threat to mainstream society, and this threat can be classified into four types. An *Exaggerated Threat* is one of these types. It combines actual and imagined threats into one. This is the most difficult type of threat to eradicate, because there may be a kernel of truth in it, however exaggerated. Some of the threats pertain to criminal behavior on the streets and the renunciation of societal values, such as the work ethic. But the primary, perceived threat is to the public’s safety on the streets.

There have been a number of editorial articles in the Waco Tribune-Herald newspaper through the years. And the following is an excerpt from a typical one:

Company’s coming. Clean up the house. Mow the lawn. Polish the silver. Scoot out the homeless. . . . We’re spending big bucks for a new nationwide advertising campaign to entice the traveling masses to stop in our fair city and ‘See For Yourself’ what Waco has to offer. And with Baylor’s entry into the Big 12 Conference, additional throngs of fans are invited--and expected--to pay us a first visit and, hopefully, return again and again. But there’s a pesky little fly in the ointment. As they journey into Waco on I-35, tourists are treated to a splendid view of the majestic halls of learning peeking through the tree-dotted campus of the prestigious university. Across the lanes of traffic, however, . . . tourists are greeted by a corps of panhandlers who have decided to establish Home Sweet Home under the interstate, just at the Baylor intersection.

The writer further suggests some possible solutions to get the “squatters” to squat someplace else, betraying at times her own biases and prejudices: (1) install bright lights under the bridge: “Some activities are better carried out in the dark, and will fizzle under the glare and scrutiny of the spotlight . . . the better to fight crime, of course;” (2) install

sprinklers under the bridge which blast cold water during the winter months and during the wee hours of the morning; (3) encourage the local convenience stores to sell only premium alcoholic beverages.

The offensive behaviors of the squatters identified by this writer included the following: (1) they panhandle tourists for money; (2) they urinate and defecate in motel parking lots, causing motel managers to refund money to unhappy guests; (3) the bums are out of place, next to the beautiful, prestigious Baylor University campus; and (4) they engage in crimes in the dark. Of these four “charges,” the first three appear to correspond to the “pesky little fly in the ointment;” the fourth charge is more pernicious and should be investigated. One should note, however, that the writer phrased this charge in such a way that one would naturally surmise that she was engaging in slander rather than reporting facts. The notions that there are dark places under the I35 overpass and that criminal activity occurs in the dark are clearly designed to prejudice the reader. I am reminded of Mr. Scrooge’s answer to giving alms to the poor in *A Christmas Carol*: “Are there no prisons?”

I was able to obtain a criminal history on Dan and found that from April, 1989 until January, 1999, he was arrested for twenty-six “crimes,” all of which were misdemeanors and twenty of them were Class C offenses, the least serious “crimes” in the Texas Penal Code. A listing of Dan’s offenses against society is as follows:

1. Public Intoxication (15 counts)--Class C Misdemeanor
2. Attempted Criminal Trespass (2 counts)--Class C Misdemeanor
3. Interfering with Railroad Property (1 count)--Class C Misdemeanor
4. Disorderly Conduct-Indecent Exposure (2 counts)--Class C Misdemeanor
5. Criminal Trespass (4 Counts)
6. Driving While Intoxicated (2 counts)

It should be noted that although vagrancy as a crime has been held by the Courts to be unconstitutional, there are other crimes which could easily take its place in a functional sense, such as public intoxication, trespassing, attempted trespassing, interfering with railroad property, and public exposure. These primarily are the “crimes” of Dan, revealing his homeless status. For non-homeless people, the police deal with Class C offenses with a citation; with a homeless person, however, the subject is taken to jail, for he cannot post bond. Thus, he is usually credited with “time served.” The only crime of importance that Dan was guilty of was DWI, and inasmuch as no accidents occurred and no one was hurt in the DWI’s, they are really what I would call “technical crimes.”

And Dan is not an isolated case. For in my interviews with other homeless, street people, I learned that their rap sheets are comparable to Dan’s. The few felonies that did appear on rap sheets were largely drug possession cases--what some researchers and academicians refer to as “victimless crimes.”

These findings are in keeping with the ethnographic research conducted by David Snow and Leon Anderson in the Austin, Texas area in the mid-1980s. What they discovered is that when violent crimes are committed by homeless, street people, the victims are largely other street people, not members of the larger society (1993:106-109). The homeless are more likely to be arrested for being drunk or a public nuisance, what Snow and colleagues would refer to as “status” crimes, because they represent encounters with the police due to the status of being homeless (Snow *et al.* 1989; Snow *et al.* 1994).

The other charges against the homeless beggars near the Baylor campus were, basically, that they were not beautiful, that they were annoying, and that they engaged in

indecenty or lewdness (relieving themselves in public). Of the latter charge, it is not said if this were done in the presence of others, although some homeless people have been known to urinate in public, without modesty or respect for others. The charge, rather, implies that they were relieving themselves secretly or anonymously, but that their fecal products would be discovered later. Of course, this charge, while appearing to be quite in keeping with rumor, is simply that. The charges that these homeless people panhandled and that they were not beautiful people are taken at face value. What is problematic is why such behavior would instill fear in others. Granted that fear is a non-rational experience, by its very nature, and that it may even be irrational, still there are some implicit beliefs that inform this fear. Orwell (1933) laments that “There exists in our minds a sort of ideal or typical tramp--a repulsive, rather dangerous creature, who would die rather than work or wash, and wants nothing but to beg, drink and rob hen-houses.”

It was Friday, April 3, in the middle of the afternoon. The temperature was in the mid-70s, windy and cloudy. I found Dan in Day Camp and announced my presence before entering. Tia barked at first, but then she was silenced by Dan. Dan and I exchanged greetings, and I asked that he review my field notes with me. It was becoming so natural for us to commence with these reviews before interviews, and the activity would take about two hours. I would also allow Dan the time to process any thoughts and feelings he might have about the notes and the interpretations I gave. There was never much disagreement over the facts, but Dan would not comment on my interpretations. He remarked on a few occasions that they were interesting, but that is all.

I wanted to interview Dan more fully about a topic we had only touched upon a few meetings ago: that of police harassment. And I wished to know about Dan's arrest record from his point of view.

"Dan, you mentioned on March 22 that you were handcuffed by a policeman who was going to take you to jail, but that you convinced him to leave you alone. Is this a common threat? Can you tell me about local arrests and trips to the jail house?"

"Sure. Let's see. I was locked up 150 days last July for Criminal Trespassing. I was on Librium, and I went to fly the sign at 17th and Waco Drive. But I was standing on private property. Officer Cane of Waco PD had warned me to stay off of this property before. And she got mad 'cause I was flying the sign, and she has to work for her money!"

"So, in your opinion, Officer Cane was 'mad' because she believed your flying the sign did not constitute work?"

"Yep. She felt it was unfair and so she was mad about that. I know she was mad 'cause of the way she spoke to me."

"I'm curious, Dan. You said that you were on Librium. How did you get this prescription drug?"

"I went in to detox at the Freeman Center, and they had me on Librium so I wouldn't croak. But I left a day or two later 'against medical advice'--they had warned me about this--and I wanted to drink and needed the money to buy the booze. I didn't get the money, but I got detoxed in jail anyway." Dan grinned.

"So, what are some other things you've been arrested for?"

“Well, you know about the DWI, and that [probation] was revoked. I got arrested a lot for being drunk. I was asleep in a boxcar once and got arrested. And Officer Cane arrested me for trespassing several times.”

“Have you ever been arrested for a felony charge or an assaultive charge?”

“Nope. Just being drunk. I’m a drunk.”

“Dan, do you know of any other homeless people who’ve been arrested for felonies or assaults?”

“Yes. Druggies. Sometimes someone will stab or shoot somebody else, but not often.”

“Do you know of some homeless people who’ve never been arrested for anything?”

“Yeah, mostly women, but some of them have been arrested. If you’re a homeless man, you’ll get harassed by the police.”

“And arrested?”

“Uh-huh. They harass you, and they arrest to harass you. Sometimes some people should be arrested, like when they hurt somebody. But being a drunk doesn’t hurt nobody. That’s harassment.”

“Dan, do you know of any police officers or sheriff’s deputies who treat you with respect?”

“Yeah, some have treated me kindly while they were arresting me. But they’re not supposed to be buddies.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Different vocations.”

“That’s right.”

I thanked Dan and noticed it was 7:00 p.m. Dan said that he’d go fly the sign some more, that he had only made \$11.65 out the window. I observed Dan for about an hour, feeling my beard that I was allowing to grow. Then I waved at Dan and left for the office to type up my field notes.

Chapter 7: Work and Drink II

On Tuesday, April 7, I drove to Dan's Day Camp but couldn't find him. So I sat down on the bucket I'd brought him on an earlier visit. The temperature was in the upper 70s. It had rained well the night before, and it was still wet and muddy in camp. The skies were cloudless at mid-morning. There was a slight breeze, but I could not feel it in camp due to the foliage serving as wind blocks. I decided to review my field notes from April 3 and decide on an interview topic.

There was a statement made by Dan in the last session regarding Officer Cane's getting "mad" because Dan didn't have to work, and I wanted to explore this issue some more. I was familiar with George Orwell's (1933) assessment of work: "It is taken for granted that a beggar does not 'earn' his living, as a bricklayer or a literary critic 'earns' his. . . . Yet if one looks closely one sees that there is no *essential* difference between a beggar's livelihood and that of numberless respectable people." Orwell argues that begging is a trade, but that the larger public fails to recognize it due to prejudice. In his opinion, the prejudice stemmed from the beggar's inability to make a decent living from it.

I had been in camp for a couple of hours sitting on the bucket. Every now and then I would stand and stretch. I was beginning to suspect that Dan might not appear for some time, and that I should return tomorrow. I remembered Dan telling me that this was Day Camp, that he slept in another camp on the other side of I35. So I was deliberating whether to search out Dan in this other camp. I walked up to the store with the intention

of buying a soft drink. Upon entering, I said hello to Shims who was watching customers browse for items. I remembered what he had told me about thefts occurring in his store, and I wondered how often people attempted to steal items and how often they were successful. I purchased a diet coke, left the store, and I spotted a figure approaching the street from about 75 yards. I knew instantly that it was Dan. But if I had not known Dan, I still would have recognized him as a homeless man. I thought of a characterization in Orwell's work (1933): "One would have known him for a tramp a hundred yards away. There was something in his drifting style of walk, and the way he had of hunching his shoulders forward, essentially abject. . . . [H]e had picked up all of a tramp's ways."

Dan was carrying Tia and was apparently headed in the direction of the median. I called to him, and he recognized me and waved for me to go to camp. Dan then unloaded Tia and his bedroll beside him. He produced his sign and began flying to passing motorists. I decided to stand beside my car and observe Dan while sipping my coke, because the vantage point was closer than that from camp.

Within a couple of minutes, Dan had gotten a lick, and he pocketed the money. Tia had assumed her respective position on the median, lying down beside her master while he worked. There was more traffic than usual due to the lunch hour. The speed limit on Waco Drive is forty mph, although it is not uncommon for motorists to travel ten miles over the speed limit. The motorists would slow down only when the traffic light changed. This is when Dan would get his licks out the window. Within the next twenty minutes, Dan got two licks. I became mesmerized by the hum of passing motorists, and time seemed to stand still. I wondered how Dan fought the boredom.

By the end of the lunch hour, I was tiring from standing and decided to go sit in camp. As I was walking to camp, I noticed Dan in my peripheral vision walking toward camp also, with Tia beside him. I waited for Dan to catch up with me and exchanged greetings.

“Slow day. Only made \$8 yesterday. \$5 today.”

Dan and I entered the camp, and he sat down and began rolling a cigarette. He looked fatigued, but he managed to grin when I would look at him. I sensed that Dan appreciated my company at these odd moments.

“So, you only made \$5 today? Did you just get started when I saw you?”

“Yeah.”

“Where were you this morning?”

“In The Cane Thicket. At my camp there.”

“So you are just now coming to the office?” The notion of an “office” I picked up from Underwood’s discussions with Jerry (1993). Dan did not actually use the term, but seemed to delight in my use of it, not only because of the humor but because he believed that this intersection was where he worked.

“Yeah.” Dan laughed. “Had a rough night. Crazy dreams. Felt a little sick this morning.” I turned off the tape recorder, and Dan and I reviewed the field notes from our last session.

“Dan, I wanted to ask you some questions about what you told me last time, when Officer Cane arrested you for trespassing.”

“Okay.”

“You interpreted Officer Cane’s treatment of you as stemming from anger because she has to work and you don’t.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do you consider what you do, flying the sign, as *work*?”

“Yeah, I do.” Dan grinned. “It’s a kind of work. I ain’t doing nothing for anybody, but it’s not easy standing out there all day long watching cars pass by.”

“Okay, so how could you say that Officer Cane was ‘mad’ at you because she had to work?”

“That’s how *she* sees it. She doesn’t consider me working when I fly the sign. That’s why she’s mad at me.”

“Do you think that she would want to trade places with you? I mean, her anger doesn’t stem from jealousy.”

“She’s mad because I’m making money doing nothing. Uh, it bothers her and other cops that we’re even out here. When people are kind to us out the window, they get pissed.”

“In other words, they don’t want you around, and it bothers them that some people take pity on you?”

“Yeah, that’s it!” Dan reached down and was petting Tia as he talked.

“Dan, tell me. Have you ever worked a regular job here in Waco?”

“I’ve been drinking nine months this time around. When I’m sober I work for Waco Storage. It’s a factory. They package sandwiches and stuff. I’ve worked for them

about a dozen times. They always hire me back. But they have to let me go when I start drinking.”

“So how long did you work for them last time?”

“About two weeks. That was a year ago, and I was living at New Hope [Ministries] and I had a car. But I went to sleep one night and wrecked it. I’ve been thirteen times to New Hope. I’ve got a job waiting for me at Morrison Insurance right now if I want it. All I gotta do is quit drinking.”

“Dan, you mentioned that you joined the Air Force and that after seventeen years they booted you out. What did you do then, as far as work?”

“I’m homeless ‘cause I want to be. I enjoy the sense of freedom with no responsibility, and I can do what I want to do. If I want to sleep late one day, then I do it. No one tells me what to do or when to do it.”

Dan smoked on his cigarette and asked me if I was going to go get something to drink. I had forgotten that I had bought a soft drink earlier and looked around for it. I looked back toward my car and saw it sitting on the hood.

“Yeah, I think I’ll go get mine off the car where I left it. Can I get you a Magnum?”

“Much obliged.”

I brought back two Magnums for Dan, and he opened one and began drinking it. “Got some more questions?”

“Well, yes. Uh, let’s see. We were talking about the type of work you’ve done since being discharged from the Air Force?”

Dan took a sip of his beer. “Well, when I was kicked out of the Air Force in 1986, I got an *Other* than Honorable Discharge. I had my ex-wife and my kid here in Waco. She works at Denny’s. And I started on my way to Waco from Sacramento where I was court-martialed. And when I got to Nevada a hobo took me under his wing and taught me how to survive. He schooled me for three months, how to run dumpsters, how to pick cans, how to ride freight trains, how to fly the sign. By 1988, I was in Seattle and had made it to Waco by freight train.”

Dan paused to smoke and sip his beer. “And I’ve been here ever since. I got a kid who is grown up now and three grandchildren. It took me three weeks to get to Waco from Seattle.”

“So you’ve been here since 1988. That’s ten years.”

“Yep.”

“And you mentioned before that you used to beg in parking lots here in Waco. Before you started flying the sign?”

“Yeah. I knew how to fly. But I started out in Waco bumming in parking lots. I would approach people and give ‘em a line. But I didn’t like that. You get a lot of rejections. On the corner you just stand there and you don’t have to say anything. And I used to run the dumpsters for food. At one time I was picking cans but the price went down and I had to walk too far to get paid.”

“How much would you make picking cans?”

“Seven dollars for twenty-three cans – that’s one pound. So I started flying the sign.”

“Do you sometimes feel ashamed or embarrassed?”

“Used to. Not anymore. You get used to it. I just hate it when they disrespect me--mostly--that’s what bothers me.”

“Dan, did you enjoy traveling around with the hobo? What was his name?”

“‘Fessor Tom! You know why they called him that?”

“No.”

“‘Cause he was a college professor once. Taught English literature in Illinois. Decided to become a hobo.”

“How old was he?”

Dan paused a moment, recollecting. “He was, uh, forty-two then. That was 1987.”

“Do you ever see him or talk to him?”

“No, he died.”

“What did he die of?”

“Cirrhosis. He died in Seattle. And I stayed there awhile afterwards. I visited Skid Row there, well, they call it Skid Road.” Dan seemed to have become quiet and reflective. I noticed the time and thanked Dan and said that I’d probably come back tomorrow. Dan grinned and thanked me for the beers.

“I guess I’ll fly some more. See ya tomorrow maybe.”

As I drove away, I thought about ‘Fessor Tom who was a hobo and taught Dan how to ride freight trains. And I considered for the first time Dan’s suggestion that I fly the sign myself.

Chapter 8: Drinking to Live

On April 8 at the noon hour, I was driving down Waco Drive in the direction of Dan's corner. It was raining, and the wind was blowing stronger than yesterday. The temperature was in the upper 70s, a bit cooler. I saw Dan from a distance and saw that I would not be able to time the traffic light to speak with him. I pulled over to the right shoulder and waited for the light to change. When it did, I pulled up to Dan and stopped. Tia was faithfully lying beside her master. I handed him \$2. At first he didn't recognize me.

"Thanks. God bless. . . . Hey brother!"

"Hey Dan, you doing okay?"

"Yeah. You gonna see me later?" He points back to the camp.

"Yeah, I just need to run a few errands. I'll be back in about thirty minutes."

"Okay. I'll be waiting for you." Dan grinned.

When I returned, Dan and Tia were seated in camp. I first went into the store and bought two Magnums from Ali. The rain had stopped, but it was still threatening.

Approaching the camp, I yelled out: "Ahoy in there! Incoming! Floyd!" I was beginning to feel more comfortable with these announcements.

"Hey, come on in, Floyd!" Dan seemed to relish moments like these.

As I walked the rest of the way to the camp, I thought of how people who own homes greet their guests at the door and exchange greetings. This was Dan's home, or

one of them. And I thought how odd it was to think of this being Dan's home; after all, Dan is considered to be homeless.

Jencks (1994) notes that 1981 marked the beginning of the use of the word "homeless" in the political arena. He also notes that in the social scientific literature, there has been some discussion over the definition of homeless. For example, is a shelter a home? And is the place where the person beds down a defining characteristic, such as a public place? And then there are persons who seem not to make up their minds from day to day where they will sleep--how should one classify them? But in Dan's case, the discussion is moot, for he slept outdoors in a "camp." When he spent the night on private property outdoors, it was without permission of the owner. From time to time, Dan might spend an evening at the McCoy's home, visiting, dining, taking a shower, and sleeping. But, by and large, Dan bedded down in his camp.

Dan opened one of the Magnums and began sipping. He wore his usual grin and seemed to be in good spirits. After reviewing my field notes from last session, I decided to talk to Dan about his alcohol consumption.

"Dan, do you always drink Magnum?"

"Yeah, it's six percent. You know, twelve proof. They don't sell it at HEB across Interstate 'cause that's Bellmead and you can only sell beer there. Magnum's malt liquor. The other beer in this store [motioning back to the convenience store behind us] is just 3-2 beer. I go into DT's if I don't drink. Now, remember Donna? She sometimes sips on my bottle, and she buys her own. She likes a different brand of malt liquor. But she doesn't drink all the time. She's what you call a social drinker."

I was surprised that Dan, who should be an expert on booze, mistook regular and light beers for 3-2 beer. 3-2 beer refers to beer that is 3.2% alcohol, which is unavailable in Texas. In the Waco area, regular beer is 4.5% alcohol on the average, and light beer is 3.9%. The so-called “non-alcoholic” brews are actually 0.5% alcohol. Coolers are generally 5% alcohol by volume, and “ice” beers are higher than that.

“Dan, you say that if you don’t drink Magnums you experience DT’s. Can you tell me more about that?”

“Well, since 6:30 this morning I’ve had three and a half Magnums. I always have to have booze in me or I go into DT’s. The worst time is Sunday mornings. If I don’t stock up, I could die.”

I noted the time so that I could mentally calculate consumption rate later. “So, you drink to stay alive?”

“Yeah. That’s one way of looking at it. I hardly ever get drunk any more. I just keep a certain amount in me. I can tell when I need to take another drink. I usually wake up around 4:00 and have to drink to get back to sleep.”

“Dan, I know this sounds like a strange request, but I carry an intoximeter with me. Would it be possible for me to take your BAC levels when I come to camp?”

“No problem. Go ahead.”

“You know, I’ve got the intoximeter in the car. Mind if I go get it now?”

“Hey. Go ahead. I’d like to see too.”

After returning from the car and taking Dan’s breath specimen, I noted his BAC to be 0.71%. I decided that I would take a number of breath tests from Dan in the future

and compare the results. There is the perception of the public that bums are usually intoxicated. In Texas prior to 9/1/01, a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of 0.10% was considered legal intoxication; after 9/1/01, Texas joined the ranks of most other states in reducing the legal intoxication level to 0.08%.

“Do you enjoy drinking, Dan?”

“Not like I used to. It’s not the same. I have to drink, but before--well, I wanted to drink. There’s a difference.”

“So you drink basically to avoid DT’s. Why did you used to drink?”

“To feel good!”

“Hmm. So you used to drink because it made you feel *good*. Now you drink--hmm--to keep from feeling *bad*?”

Dan chuckled. “Hey, that’s about it!”

I thought of the irony involved in Dan’s drinking history. Things had turned out for him differently than he planned. And Dan felt, in some sense, trapped in his circumstances. He did admit to quitting from time to time and holding a job at Waco Storage, but he would return to drinking in a short period of time.

“Dan, you said that sometimes you sober up and work a spell. Why, if you are sober, would you go back to drinking?”

“I feel lousy when I’m straight, empty inside. There’s only one way to bring up my mood, so I get thirsty.”

“Have you always been depressed, throughout your life?”

“Depressed? Maybe a little. But depression. I started getting depressed in the 80s, when I would sober up, which wasn’t for long.”

“So the real depression hit you well into your drinking years, and you continued to drink--did you continue to drink to keep from feeling bad then?”

“Yeah. I used to get high--in the 80s I didn’t get high anymore. I just feel normal now but only sometimes--I drink to just feel halfway decent about life. But I don’t get high anymore. I get drunk sometimes, but not high, not like I used to.” Dan seemed to be reflecting on what he was saying, as if he were realizing some truth for the first time.

“Okay, I need to express this so I can understand. You started drinking in 1970 in the Air Force. And you drank for the effect--to feel high. And then you would come back down to a normal mood state.” I looked at Dan who was looking intently back at me as if we were “on to something.”

I continued. “By the 80s, though, you would not feel normal when you would sober up. You would feel depressed. You began drinking to--to just feel normal again. Now, in the 90s you continue to drink to feel normal again--not high--but you also drink to avoid feeling bad, like with DT’s.”

Dan paused a moment, as if reflecting on what I was saying. “I would say that that’s pretty close, yeah.” Dan grinned, and I detected a look of peace in his eyes, which surprised me, for anyone else might look upon the development of this type of mood history as tragic and the discussion, in and of itself, depressing.

“So, Dan, there are blue laws in Texas on Sunday. And you can’t buy booze during that time. You mentioned that you had to stock up to get you by.”

“Right. Before the store closes. You know, they close at 1:00 a.m.”

“I didn’t know that.” I had thought it was midnight.

Dan had a look of seriousness, as if this were very important information. “They close at *one o’clock*.” He stressed the time, then continued, “I get five Magnums to last me till noon. That’s a long time. It’s pretty hard lugging five of ‘em around.”

“Yeah, water or any other fluid weighs a lot. I have a friend who goes backpacking periodically, and he says that the heaviest thing to carry on his back is the water, the water they need to survive. So the water has to go along, regardless of how heavy it is.”

“And so does the *fire* water.” Dan smiled openly, and I laughed at his pun. And he continued, for emphasis and effect, “and you have to carry it too--for survival.” And with that final word, Dan looked a bit serious and stopped smiling. We both sat speechless for about fifteen minutes. We were comfortable with each other.

The sky thundered, and it began raining. Dan just sat there in the rain, while I pulled the hood of my windbreaker over my head. I had a holiday coming up in a couple of days, Good Friday, and I had decided that it would be a good day to be with Dan.

“So are you going to fly any more?”

“Yeah, I need a couple more licks, then I’ll quit.” I looked at Tia who was flinching her eyes at the falling rain.

“I guess I’ll go Dan. Thanks for visiting with me, as usual, and thanks for your help with my notes.”

“You got some good ones today.”

“Yes, I did. Thanks again.” And with that I turned off my tape recorder, exchanged goodbyes, and headed for my car. The rain was coming down harder and the traffic was heavy as I watched Dan walk toward his corner.

Chapter 9: The Cane Thicket

It was Good Friday, April 10. It had been very chilly earlier in the morning, but by 8:30 it had begun to warm up. The skies were cloudless, the air was windless, and there was no trace of the rain we had two days ago, except for occasional small puddles of water. As I drove up to camp I could not detect anyone there. So I decided to go in search of Dan. I had told him that I'd return today, but I didn't tell him when, and I wasn't sure how early Dan started flying the sign. So I sat in my car for about fifteen minutes, debating whether to search for Dan's camp across I35 or stay and wait and hope that he would come.

I looked over my field notes and realized that Dan had provided me a perspective on alcohol addiction that was startling. In particular, I was intrigued by the ironic nature of drinking over the course of years. Dan initially drank, he said, for the effect: to feel good. But there was a point in his life when his motivation for drinking shifted. He continued to drink, but I wasn't so sure that Dan was aware of when the shift in motivation occurred. At some point in time, Dan's normal (and sober) mood state shifted from euthymic-irritable to dysthymic, and then perhaps to dysphoric, just the opposite of the effect that alcohol provided him in his youth. Alcohol still brought about an elevation in mood, but apparently alcohol could no longer take him to the heights he used to feel. Now it merely allowed him to feel normal. It's as if alcohol could only elevate a mood a certain quantifiable amount, and the high one could experience depended to some extent on the mood level he started from.

During the following weeks, I consulted with fellow alcohol counselors in the Waco area for verification of this phenomenon, and I was directed to the book by Vernon Johnson, *I'll Quit Tomorrow* (1980) wherein he describes just this type of phenomenon among alcoholics with his concept of a "progressive emotional cost." Johnson's concept grew from hundreds of interviews he had with alcoholics while heading up the Johnson Institute (Minneapolis, MN) for alcohol addiction.

As I sat contemplating this issue of mood degradation, I decided to go in search of Dan. I crossed over to the other side of I35 and drove slowly along the access road looking into the highly vegetated area. The noise of trucks and cars traversing the highway was at times deafening. I could not see anyone, but I realized that this was a good place for a camp, for no one would be able to detect a homeless camp from the road. I parked the car in the Sam's Club parking lot and walked back toward the secluded area. I walked about a half mile along the curb but didn't see any signs of a camp, and so I decided to walk back to my car. About 50 yards from my car, I heard a whistle. I turned and looked back into the vegetated area, but could make out no one. For a moment I felt a chill of fear. Could I be assaulted or nabbed by some by some dangerous thug or drug fiend lurking in the bushes?

I stood there, searching for some resemblance of Dan. At least, I was hoping it was Dan. And then he called, "Hey! Floyd! Over here!" I felt a sense of relief and followed the voice, and within seconds I was following a path that I had overlooked. The bamboo averaged eight to twelve feet in height. There was considerable more foliage than at Day Camp. I stayed on the path and eventually the bushes and trees gave way to

an area of grass surrounded by trees. I had the sensation of being in a natural alcove. In the middle of the alcove was a tree with a plastic bag and an empty, plastic milk jug hanging from its branches. Off to the side sat Dan and Tia. Dan was smoking a cigarette.

“You found me!” greeted Dan, as I walked toward him.

“This is different from what I expected. Well, this is nicer than Day Camp.”

“Yeah, too many fire ants over there, and too much traffic.”

I understood by traffic that Dan meant other homeless people, so I asked to make sure. “By traffic do you mean homeless people?”

“Uh-huh. *Street people*.” Dan would emphasize a word when he wanted me to understand the vernacular.

Dan was squatting while Tia lay beside him. She would open her left eye, with her head down, every now and then, but then would close her eye as if sleeping. I sat down on the grass, placing my field notes in my lap. I placed my tape recorder on the ground beside me.

“Well, whadaya think?” asked Dan.

“I understand why you sleep here. It’s more like a small, encapsulated park.”

“I call it The Cane Thicket.”

“I can’t see the cars from here.” How remarkable it was that within thirty yards was a service road of an interstate highway. “You are well hidden in here.”

“I saw *you*.” Dan grinned. “I saw you walk by, but I didn’t recognize you at first. Then when you walked back by again, I whistled at ya.”

“Dan, how long have you lived here--wait--do you mind if we go over my field notes first?”

“Nah, go ahead.” So I turned off the recorder, and for the next two hours Dan and I reviewed the notes. Dan seemed to have a more than normal interest in what I had written, but as usual, he never ventured to comment on my interpretations of what was said, only the content itself. I had thought on earlier occasions that it must be because Dan was not knowledgeable enough to consider theories or perhaps that he silently disagreed with what I wrote, but for the sake of courtesy, chose not to delve into such topics. So I asked him after turning on my recorder.

“Dan, why do you not comment on my interpretations in the field notes?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for example, two days ago we talked about your alcohol consumption and about mood states and elevation of mood states and your motivations for drinking.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I also include, you see, my interpretations of our dialogues. For example, I wrote about Jenck’s survey of definitions of homelessness, about the irony of your drinking predicament. And on other days, I have spoken of, like subcultural style, where your clothing is not only a ploy, you know ‘Hollywood,’ but also a symbol of defiance. I have linked your mistrust of police to the ‘culture of poverty’ idea and also to your own experience of being kicked out of the Air Force. That’s what I mean by interpretation.”

“Okay.” Dan paused, as if thinking about it.

“And so, I wondered why you always comment on what is actually said between us, but you never comment on my *interpretations* of what is said.”

Dan looked me straight in the eye and said, with emphasis: “That’s because that’s what’s important. What we *say* is what’s important. The other--well, you gotta do that in college. But what is important is in the *words*, and *you* gotta find it.” And with that, Dan put out his cigarette, grinned, and stroked Tia, who opened one eye and huffed once. And I felt a shudder pervade my body, as if Dan has provided me with some truth. And I remembered Underwood’s ethnography, *The Bridge People*, and remembered how the best parts, the parts that provided me with the most meaning, were in the dialogues. And I thought how strange it was that interpretation was somehow embedded in words exchanged between people who embraced two different worldviews.

I sat there for a while looking at the trees and brush. I could see a larger creek than at Day Camp, through the trees to my right. I watched a mockingbird chase a squirrel, and I heard the familiar caws and inhalations of grackles in the trees. I felt separated from the hustle and bustle of city life, and I felt safe, a totally different sensation than I felt when being addressed with the whistle, while walking down the busy service road.

“Dan, what’s in that plastic bag and bottle?” I pointed to the two items hanging from the branches of the small hackberry.

“Clothes, sometimes food, and water in the jug.” I keep it off the ground because of ants and varmints.”

“What about fire ants?”

“There are some here—not like at Day Camp. When I’m here I’ll lay my tarp on the ground, roll up the edges about three or four inches like this.” Dan pretended that he was rolling up the edges. “And I’ll sling some syrup or jelly on a tree or on the ground somewhere for the ants, and they’ll all go there. I don’t ever eat around camp, ‘cause it draws fire ants.”

“Have you ever shared this camp with anyone?”

“There’s a black man named Bobby. He sleeps here every now and then. But he has a wife and kids. She runs the Motel 6 up the street.”

“So she works?”

“Yeah. And they have a home. And Doc was here for a while before he was arrested on a blue warrant, you know, parole violation, about four months ago. And they took him back to California.”

“Why do you call him Doc?”

“‘Cause one of his friends got the shank in the pen a while back, and Doc sewed him up. He’s gone by that nickname ever since. Back at camp, remember the cowboy boots on the ground? They were his. He left ‘em there four months ago.”

Dan pointed to his roll. “This contains two blankets and a bed roll, wrapped in a ten by twenty tarp. I’ve got one, two, three . . .” Dan was thumbing through the shirts he was wearing, “. . . shirts on, plus this jacket. I stay warm enough. But if it starts raining, then I go under the bridge there. See that 30 degree slope? And put my feet against one of those columns half-way up so I won’t roll down in my sleep.”

“So you sleep under the I35 overpass when it’s raining?”

“Yep. I can get clothes at Caritas Thrift Store. You can get a pair of pants for one or two dollars, but most of the clothes I have I made it out the window.”

“So you don’t just get money and food out the window?”

“People hand me everything, not just money, but clothes, cigarettes. I’ve even had people give me weed, but I don’t smoke it. I take it though. I take everything that’s offered, ‘cause I don’t want to make it appear to them that I’m choosy or unappreciative. And I also don’t want to hurt the next guy who flies the sign.”

I looked at my watch. It was early afternoon. “Dan, are you going to fly today?”

“Nah, I made enough yesterday. I’m taking off today, like a lot of people.”

We exchanged farewells, and I promised Dan that I would see him Sunday morning. He invited me to the Church under the Bridge and said that I could meet him there. As I left The Cane Thicket, I felt that I was slowly re-emerging back into reality. When I got to the service road, I looked back, but Dan was hidden well behind the cane thicket, bushes, and trees.

Chapter 10: Easter Sunday

It was a gusty and cloudless Easter Sunday as I drove to the Church under the Bridge. This Church is outdoors under an I35 overpass near Baylor University. It attracts the poor and dispossessed and also Baylor students who wish to engage in Christian service work. I got there at 10:30 a.m. and began looking for Dan. There must have been about 75 people under the bridge. There was a table with coffee available for anyone. Some people were setting up folding chairs, and a band was tuning up. I finally found Dan in the very back, sitting on one of the folding chairs. At his side lay Tia. Dan was conversing with a scrawny, scruffy-looking man. Dan and I exchanged greetings, and then he introduced me to Lee. As I shook Lee's hand I could see that he had very bad teeth, dingy, with most of them missing.

Dan felt an explanation was necessary. "I always sit in the back, 'cause of Tia. Plus I get to drink."

I was aware that Dan's camp was about four miles away. "So how did you get here, Dan?"

"Had breakfast at 6:30 with my ex-wife at Denny's and then walked over."

"So how did you get to Denny's from your camp?" Denny's was an additional mile away.

"Walked. Started out early with Tia."

"Have you been coming here long?"

“Yeah, about three years. It’s run by Jimmy Dorrell. I like to go to the Church under the Bridge ‘cause I get to visit. But I also like the music. They’re ‘for real’ people, man.” Dan paused a moment, as if reflecting. “On Sunday, people will give me money ‘cause they feel guilty and went to church today.”

I spoke with Lee for a while who was friendly. Lee spoke of the camp he lived in. He showed me his bike that he bought at the Salvation Army. Lee lives in a camp near Baylor. He wore a cap, jeans, and a long-sleeved, plaid shirt buttoned up to his neck. Lee said that he was on probation for DWI and that he had seen me at the probation office. Lee was 48 years old, slightly older than Dan.

Lee looked intently at me, “Do you know how I can get outta that school?”

“What school? You mean, DWI School?”

“No. The one on 8th Street. It ain’t gonna do me no good.”

“You mean the GED classes? Why would they not do you any good?”

“Oh no, I couldn’t get no GED. I’m talking about the other one where you learn to read and write.”

“You mean the basic education class?”

“Yeah. How can I get outta it?”

“Well, I’m not sure you can. It’s a condition of your probation and it’s required by the State of Texas for everyone on probation. If you test out at the sixth grade level or higher, then you don’t have to take the classes.”

“Well, I only went to the third grade, and I don’t read and write very well.”

“Well, in that case, you are required to learn how to read and write until you get to the sixth grade level. It’s called basic literacy. Don’t you want to learn how to read and write?”

“Won’t do *me* no good.”

“Why do you say that?”

“‘Cause I’m dumb.”

“I doubt that’s true. But wouldn’t you like to know how to read and write?”

“Still won’t do me no good.”

“Why? Why do you say that?”

“‘Cause nothing will change. What difference will it make? I’m just trying to get through this stupid probation.”

“So you are on probation for DWI?”

“Yeah, for DWI.”

“How did you get a driver’s license without reading and writing? Don’t they require you to take a written test?”

“Ain’t got no driver’s license. Never did. But they still gave me the DWI!” Lee spoke as if the police had no right to arrest him without the driver’s license.

Dan interrupted, “Yeah, it don’t matter if you have a license or not, if you’re drunk and you’re driving, they’ll get ya.”

Lee nodded his head in agreement but didn’t appear to be convinced.

When the church service was nearly over, Dan told me that he was leaving, but that if I wanted to come by the camp later, I could. I offered to drive him and Tia to the

camp, and Dan accepted. Dan placed Tia in the floorboard of the front, passenger seat and sat down. I felt a return of some old fears about getting lice or fleas in my car seat, or something unimaginable. I thought of whether I should have placed the newspaper over the seat before Dan sat down, but then realized that Dan might be offended.

We got to Day Camp at noon. Dan and Tia got out of the car, and I asked him if he needed some booze.

“Got a stash. They won’t sell ‘em today. It’s Easter.”

When we got to camp, I turned off my recorder, and Dan reviewed my field notes from our last session. Dan was helpful in correcting a few words that I had misheard, and the dialogue made better sense with the corrections. I will always be grateful to Dan for his assistance in reconstructing our dialogues together, and I encourage field workers to enlist the support of their informants. This, of course, implies continuity and organization in efforts, but it also builds rapport between field researcher and subject.

While Dan and I were just finishing the review, we heard, “Hey there in the camp! It’s me!” I turned to look at a man of medium height and medium build approaching the camp from the direction of I35 along the creek. I mentioned to Dan that he startled me. Dan grinned and said he saw him coming from across I35.

“Who is he?”

“That’s Lucius. He’s a coon ass.”

“What’s a coon ass?”

Just then, Lucius appeared in camp. When he shook my hand, he placed his right index finger against my wrist. I asked him if that was a special handshake.

“Just checking your pulse. That’s where you’re alive.”

Lucius sat down on a rock, and although I offered my bucket, he declined.

“Where are you from, Lucius? I notice that you have an accent.”

“Chinook. From the Bayou.”

“Chinook?” I couldn’t tell if he were naming a city or an ethnic group.

Lucius continued, “South Louisiana. I’m Canadian French and Indian.”

Dan interrupted, “Coon ass.”

“Ha, that’s it, yesiree,” answered Lucius. “I never stay in one place for over two weeks.”

Dan said, “He can stay with me as long as he wants.”

“So do the both of you know each other?”

Dan answered, “I’ve known Lucius since last year when he came through another camp I was at.”

“Yeah, that was over across--no, it was next to that motel.”

“Yeah, that was it,” answered Dan. “I like it better over here. Got my own corner. Floyd here is doin’ research for college. But I knew him three years ago when he was my teacher in DWI School.”

“I got two DWI’s, but I never went to school for it. He he,” laughed Lucius. Dan and I both laughed at the joke.

Lucius continued, “You’re interviewing Dan about DWI’s? I was in an accident twice. The second time I crashed under an eighteen wheeler that was parked. I ducked just in time, and my car slid right in under. Chopped off half the roof.”

“Could’ve been your head,” interjected Dan.

“Yeah, I know. And--he he--I slept in the car till morning as the sun was rising, and I crawled out and left it there. I was nearly to the street when the cops came and arrested me. I refused to blow, because I was stubborn. They wanted it, and I wouldn’t give it to ‘em. I told ‘em that if they were going to arrest me, then they better do it, but I wasn’t goin’ to help ‘em none. And they took me to jail and I stayed there for nine months.”

“Don’t they allow you to bond out before court?”

“Not a drunk--street person,” replied Dan. “When they arrest ya, ya stay there till you serve your time.”

“Hmm,” said Lucius, agreeing by nodding his head.

Dan continued, “And it’s okay to stay in jail. It’s clean, you get three squares a day, and if you’re a trusty you can get smokes.”

“Umm. Yeah. He he,” agreed Lucius. “But you don’t get to drink. So it ain’t *all* good.”

We all laughed at Lucius’ statement, but also at his way of speaking with his distinctive accent, and Lucius seemed to relish laughter too.

“So, when did you get your DWI’s, Lucius?”

“Oh, man, that was in the 70s. Haven’t drove since. Learned my lesson.”

“Have you ever been arrested for anything else?”

“Yeah, being drunk--being drunk mostly. You know, chicken shit stuff like that. They gotta meet their quotas.”

I looked at Dan who was shaking his head in disagreement. “They got quotas for traffic, but not for PI’s. They get ya for PI’s to harass ya ‘cause they don’t want ya around.”

“Hmm,” replied Lucius, “yeah, that’s it. But they got quotas in Louisiana.”

“But not in Waco,” replied Dan.

“So, Lucius, you said that you learned your lesson? What did you mean by that?”

“Well, nearly checked out. He he. Didn’t dawn on me till the next day when I was sitting in that cop car, and I looked back at my car squashed under the truck. It could’ve taken my head clean off.”

“So you learned not to drive drunk?”

“Yeah, that’s it. He he. Get drunk all the same, but I haven’t drove since the 70s. Less dangerous that way. I used to ride a bike, but somebody was always stealing ‘em, so I said, ‘What the hell am I doin’ this for?’ So I started walking everywhere and hitchin’.”

Dan looked at Lucius. “You wanna fly?”

Lucius looked back at the corner. “What time is it?”

“2:35,” I answered, looking at my watch.

“Okie dokie.”

“Wanna use my sign?”

“Yeah, okay.” And then Lucius headed for the corner, while Dan walked over to a tree and pulled out a Magnum from behind it and brought it back. Dan stood for a

while and drank his Magnum. And we both watched Lucius who was standing, slumped over, holding his sign.

Dan could tell that I was noticing Lucius. “That’s *his* Hollywood--all slumped over like that.”

Within a minute, Lucius got a lick.

“Got a dollar.”

“Dan, you can’t see that far.”

“Got a dollar. Go ask him.” Dan grinned and looked at me with eyes of understanding.

So I walked to the curb and yelled out to Lucius, “How much you make there?”

“Gotta buck,” answered Lucius. He reached into his pant’s pocket, pulled out the dollar and waved it at me.

When I got back to camp I asked Dan if he really saw the dollar.

“No. But I saw everything else. I know how much they’re making. Like that day with Donna. I could tell how much she was making out the window.”

“What do you notice?”

“I see the look on the guy’s face and . . .”

“Which guy?” I interrupted.

“The one who’s giving it.”

“Okay.”

“And I see the reactions of the guy who made it. When he gets it and when he puts it away. And I know how much they’re giving on a given day anyway, too.”

“Wow,” I said in amazement.

“You fly the sign and you watch other guys fly the sign all day long for years, and you pick up on that. I make it a game--passes the time.”

“Do you ever get bored, Dan?”

“There’s another lick! That’s his second!”

I looked toward the median and saw Lucius walking back to the median from a pickup truck. “Is Sunday a good day to fly?”

“Depends on what time of day. During the day before evening. After evening, they forgot about it.”

“Forgot about what?”

“That it’s Easter and you’re supposed to be Christ-like. There’s a lick! His third!”

“So how can people act Christ-like?”

“By caring for unfortunate souls--giving alms to the poor.”

“Maybe some of the motorists out there aren’t really Christians, though.”

“Yeah, maybe. But most of ‘em claim to be. They’re hypocrites.”

“I see your point. And if one claims to be a Christian, then he should act Christ-like--especially on Sunday, the Christian day of worship.”

“Right. Now take most of the people at the Church under the Bridge. Some of them are hypocrites, but most of ‘em are trying to minister to unfortunate souls, just like Jesus did. They’re not big on show. They don’t spend money on fancy church buildings and fancy suits to wear. They don’t snuff me because I’m a bum. That’s what Jesus was

like. He showed compassion to outcasts and poor people, even criminals. He didn't think he was better than they was. There's another lick. That's his fourth! He'll be coming in now."

"How do you know he will?"

"Because he's got eight dollars. He always quits when he's got eight dollars."

I looked at Lucius who was still standing on the median, but he wasn't looking at the passing motorists, but rather toward I35.

"He's thinking about visiting another camp."

I watched Lucius and wondered how Dan could know these things without standard communication taking place. "Dan, how do you know that? Are you guessing?"

"You watch people long enough and you can predict what they're gonna do."

At that moment, Lucius started walking toward us. When he got to camp, he said, "I think I'll go visit Dwayne and Becky. I'm goin' to leave it with ya, Dan."

Dan replied, "Yeah, see ya later."

I asked Lucius, "How much you make?"

"Made eight dollars out the window. That's all I need. Well, see ya. You study hard on them books."

"I sure will. Good luck to you, Lucius. Nice to meet you."

And with that, Lucius headed toward I35.

"Dan, are you gonna fly?"

"Yeah, I got three bottles left. Need to make \$7 out the window so I can buy six more. This'll get me through the night. You gonna leave?"

“Yeah, I think I’ll call it a day. Good luck, Dan. I’ll see you probably tomorrow. No, probably on Tuesday.”

Dan headed toward the median, taking Tia with him. As I was getting into my car, I saw that Dan got his first lick.

Chapter 11: Invisibility

Barak (1991) reports that most people respond with indifference to the plight of the homeless, and in urban areas the homeless are relatively invisible or hidden. Being hidden and being invisible are not necessarily synonymous, for invisibility can result when the larger public refuses to see or ignores the homeless. At street corners, motorists may ignore homeless beggars and pretend that they are invisible.

*Encroaching onto rank,
raucous traffic ways,
street beings signal
to lines of lifeless,
commuter stares.*

*Patiently, they search for
anomalies among avoiding,
robotic eyes encased
in grimey, cold-metal*

*microcosms, jerking inert
figures along frozen tracks
of time and space. A warp
in the social fabric produces*

*an alien being offering
pocket change. The bums
theorize about the reality
and existence of non-bums.*

*They talk and wonder
in their camps, their homes.
Venturing into Skid Road,
a scientist records Bum*

*Talk. The sphere of normalcy
awaits the published revelation
from his lips: "Mostly alcoholics,*

their mobility being due to a loss

*of social anchors.” The sphere
of normalcy is nourished, satiated,
relieved; but the bums are anxious
still, for they do not know of it. (F. B.)*

It was the Tuesday after Easter, and I was driving to see Dan at Day Camp around mid-morning. It was windy and wet from the previous day’s rain. The temperature was climbing to the upper 80s.

I thought of Jennifer Toth’s (1993) depiction of invisibility among the Mole People who live in the tunnels beneath New York City. Toth views the Mole People as being pushed underground by the larger populace. They are anonymous, with no names, no identities. In this new home, they have “peace” to think about their situation, free from distraction. And they have decided to stay underground until they are pushed again.

I wondered to what extent the street people of Waco participate in this type of marginality, and to what extent a larger, Waco society relegates them to places where they can’t be seen. The editorials in the newspapers complain about the homeless being so visible near Baylor University and at intersections throughout Waco where people find it difficult to ignore them. Waco police officers are enjoined to harass them when they reveal themselves in public, forcing them to hide in camps and at eco-niches throughout the urban area. People with whom street people come in contact may give verbal and non-verbal cues that encourage distance and segregation.

If a street person were treated in this way, then he might choose to hide from public view whenever possible. His survival depends on flying the sign and becoming visible in a most dramatic way, but his survival also depends on hiding in a secure place

free from harassment and other forms of aggression. Thus these are the extremes in the life of a homeless beggar. He chooses to become invisible in order to survive on the streets, but he also chooses to venture into the public view and become very visible. His attire that is symbolic of poverty is also symbolic of defiance, and its effect on street corners is provocative. He gets the attention of those who might rather ignore him.

And then there is the aspect of visibility and invisibility where selective perceptions are involved: that although the street beggars are very visible and post themselves in areas where they are most likely to be noticed, many motorists choose to pretend that the street beggars are not there, even though they stand less than three feet from their car windows, holding signs, and looking straight into their eyes. The mind can select what it wants to perceive and filter out what it would rather avoid.

As I exited I35, I immediately saw Dan and Tia walking to Day Camp, so I stopped to give them a ride. I noticed that I was less apprehensive this time about germs and parasites. We exchanged greetings, and I told Dan that I'd like to talk about the motorists who *don't* offer licks out the window. I thought that Dan might be surprised with this request, but he just grinned and said, "Okay, sure."

While driving to camp, I noticed a young male at Dan's corner, flying the sign.

"Who's that, Dan?"

"He's a rock star."

I retrieved my tape recorder from the glove box, sat it between us, and turned it on. "Really? You mean he used to be a rock star?"

Dan laughed. “No. He flies the sign to get rocks--crack. See that other guy in camp?”

As I pulled into the parking lot of the convenience store, I strained to see whom Dan was referring to. Partly shielded behind a mid-sized tree was a large black man, standing.

Dan said, “They’re a salt and pepper team.” Dan laughed at the grimace on my face. He explained, “One’s white, and one’s black.”

“Oh, okay.

“Say, can you do me a favor?” asked Dan.

“Sure, what is it?”

“I got some money that I paid the IRS last year and I want to get it back. I went to a post office to get one of those EZ forms but they were out. Can you get me that form?”

“Sure, and I’ll get the instructions that go with it too. I’ll get them and bring them to you next time.”

“Sure would appreciate it.”

“Glad to help.”

While Dan went to his camp, I decided to go into the store and buy some Magnums for Dan. When I came out and was walking toward the camp, I saw that the black man in camp was walking toward the median. I entered the camp and handed Dan two Magnums, and I opened a twelve-ounce beer for myself. Dan opened a bottle and began drinking.

“Dan, do you know the salt and pepper team?”

“Yeah. The rock star’s just a kid. I even made the sign for him, ‘cause he can’t read or write. He told me to write, ‘Trying to Feed 2 Kids,’ but he ain’t doin’ that,” Dan remarked with contempt. “He don’t take care of his kids. He only buys rocks.”

“But isn’t that good Hollywood, to pretend to take care of your kids?”

“No, not if you really have kids like I do and he does too. Until 1986 I supported my kid and I came to Waco to be near her. I got a kid and three grandkids. What he said bothers me. So I didn’t write what he wanted. He doesn’t know the difference anyway-- can’t read and write.”

“So you share your corner with them?” I was looking back toward the median and noticed that the black man had sat down on the side of the road.

“Yeah, they can fly, but when it’s my time, I’ll run ‘em off. I’ll walk up to ‘em and holler, ‘Hey man, shift change!’ and they’ll leave. All I gotta do is walk out there with my dog.”

“Do you think he’s getting any licks?”

“Probably, but most people figure that if you’re young, you otta be working. Me? I’m older. I can make a lot of money out there. Sometimes up to \$75, but on a good day I quit at \$12.”

“Why don’t you make more?”

“They’re gone!” remarked Dan. Startled, I looked up to notice the two men walking back toward downtown Waco.

“You know, Dan, making \$50-\$75 a day is pretty good income, and you said it’s tax-free?”

“Yeah, but I quit as soon as I can. Going out there is tiring. It drains me ‘cause you have to deal with all that crap. Like ‘Hey, get a job!’ or ‘You worthless bum!’ And since 1986 there’s been over 100 people who will stop and hold out their hands, and when I go over to them, they open their hands, and they’re empty. So when I finish flying I’m ready to turn in for the night. I always buy my booze around six or seven.”

“Dan, tell me about the motorists who don’t give out the window and who don’t yell at you. What about the others?”

“I think I know what you mean. Most people will ignore me, look away, pretend to fiddle with stuff in the car. And they avoid eye contact, like I wasn’t even there.”

“Dan, in what ways have you hidden yourself from others?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like The Cane Thicket is hidden from view, and this creek area has enough foliage to hide you, partially. That’s what I mean, when you make yourself less visible.”

“Okay. I’ve lived in vacant houses, under bridges. I’ve gone to sleep on the side of buildings. There’s a lot of places where you can hide out. Most nights now I sleep in The Cane Thicket.”

“All of those sound like places, little nooks and crannies where you could hide from the public. Well, except living under bridges. Do you mean under overpasses? Isn’t this kinda in the open?”

“Depends. There are lots of underpasses not even close to streets. And some are over railroad tracks. But I’ve slept under bridges next to major streets.”

“That doesn’t seem to be hiding out.”

“When most people drive, they’re thinking about other things, the job they have to go to, the bills they have to pay, the places they have to go to. And they don’t see what’s around ‘em. Cars pass me by when I’m on the concrete slope, and they never see me. It’s as if I wasn’t even there.”

“It’s like you’re invisible.”

“Yeah. But if they would bother to look, they’d see I was right-smack dab in the middle of it all.”

I thought of Ellis’ monologue regarding his own invisibility, how he was invisible because people refused to see him (Ellis 1947).

“Dan, is it the nature of camp locations that they’re hidden?”

“Sure.”

“And why is this? What or who are homeless people hiding from?”

“From the police, from robbers. And, well, we like privacy in our camps just like you do in your home. You hafta understand that we’re out in the open, with no protection. So it helps to be hidden, for privacy, and for protection.”

“Have you ever been robbed, Dan?”

“Yeah. It’s dangerous walking at night through No-Man’s Land [This is an area between the municipalities of Waco, Bellmead, and Lacy-Lakeview that is only patrolled by deputy sheriffs.]. I’ve been stabbed in the side and was taken to the hospital, and I’ve

been cut on my right arm.” Dan pulled up his sleeve and showed me a long scar on his bicep. I’ve been shot twice. I’ve been hit over the head with bottles and tree limbs.”

“Tell me about when you were stabbed in the side. Is that when you were robbed?”

“In 1989, I was making some good money on 17th street at I35. I was with Ray. And Ray wanted to go buy some wine, but I got sleepy ‘cause I was drunk. When I woke up, all my money was gone. So I went back to Ray’s camp on 6th street. I got into an argument with Ray and pushed him. And Ray stabbed me in the side and my intestines were hanging out. So Mick pushed my intestines back in. Then the PD came and an ambulance. I was out of the hospital the next day.”

I looked at my watch and I remembered that we had not reviewed the field notes from our last session. Dan and I therefore reviewed them, because he wanted to fly the sign by 4:30 p.m., when the traffic was heavier. By 3:30 p.m. we had finished, however, and so Dan walked out to the median after exchanging farewells.

Chapter 12: Kinship

Singer (1985) examined the perception or belief that indigent skid row men are social isolates who lack significant involvement with consanguineous or affinal kin. In his study of twenty-eight patients at a detox unit in Washington, DC, Singer concluded that twenty-five of them had regular contact with at least one relative, and that eighteen had monthly contact with at least three relatives. One might assume that Dan was a social isolate himself, but the following narrative would indicate otherwise. Dan had regular contact with his family and the motivations for such contact did not appear to stem from economic and social dependency. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case: Dan lived in the Waco community to be near his daughter, grandchildren, and ex-wife so that he could assist them and be a part of their lives. And in addition to regular contact with his family, Dan's social network included other street persons, a family who befriended him, and an episodic employer.

A criticism of the lifestyle that Dan led is that he neglected his obligations to his family, and inasmuch as Dan was divorced, the sense of obligation would center upon his daughter and grandchildren. The perception of some members of society is that bums have lost all: job, home, possessions, family, friends, health, and more intangible things such as motivation, dignity, and self-esteem. Some of these losses are more apparent than real, for in some sense Dan did have a "job" and a "home" (base camp), although he did not meet cultural criteria for such. Dan did have a family, and there were times when he took his role as father and grandfather seriously. In his ethnography of American

kinship, Schneider informs us that in cognatic relationships, one practices love, which he defines as “enduring, diffuse solidarity.” And Schneider also points out that love can be expressed in a wide variety of different ways (Schneider 1980:61).

One may argue that Dan, as a homeless person, did not fulfill his daughter’s expectations for a father or grandfather. After all, Dan’s lifestyle was not conducive to normal relationships. The most striking anomalies would be his drinking behavior and his hygiene. These features could interfere with healthy relationships. Dan is a sick man who is behaving contrary to medical advice. He carries a certain amount of stigma associated with his choice of lifestyle which may also interfere with healthy relationships. If one needed Dan for anything, how dependable would he be? Would a protective mother leave her children for an unsupervised period of time with their grandfather? These and similar questions deserve honest answers.

Dan moved to Waco for the express purpose of being available to his daughter and grandchildren. And he continued to have a relationship with his ex-wife who also lived in Waco. One may be skeptical of the ways in which Dan actually was available, being a penniless bum and not taking up residence in a house or apartment. Dan did, from time to time, take up residence at the group home for men, New Hope Ministries. In this setting, he was required to work and save money. In my interviews with Dan, his ex-wife, and his daughter, I learned that these periods of episodic sobriety coincided with some of the financial needs of the daughter. For example, when Janet was about to marry, neither she nor her mother had the financial resources for a nice wedding. Dan had about \$300 in his savings, however, and he purchased a wedding dress for her. Dan

was also available at times for emotional advice and support. And during a protracted illness when Janet was bedridden, Dan babysat his three grandchildren until she recuperated. During this time, he did not drink. Dan met with Janet's mother on a regular basis (nearly weekly at Denny's) and discussed the needs of their daughter. One finds that, rather than completely neglecting his role as father, Dan fulfilled some aspects of it.

It was a Wednesday in April as I drove to Day Camp. The weather was windy, and the temperature had climbed to 80 degrees by mid-afternoon. As I pulled into the convenience store parking lot, I could not tell if anyone were in camp. I watched for any movements, but detected none. I had learned by now that an inability to detect movement or persons in the camp did not necessarily mean that none were there. The foliage and trees provided an excellent cover for privacy from the pedestrians and motorists of the city. I had brought my camera because Dan wanted me to take a photo of him and his dog, Tia, and also of his camp. I would take, in all, four photos on this day.

But there was no one home. I decided to wait and look over my notes of the previous day. Within 10 minutes, I heard a familiar voice, heralding his approach, "Hey in the Camp! Dan and dog incoming!" I turned to see Dan walking halfway down the path with Tia alongside him. As Dan got nearer, I could see him clutching a brown bag. He had already been to Shims' store.

"Hello Dan. How are you today?"

“We’re good. I see you showed up. I saw you drive up and take those pictures. I went in and bought some Magnums.”

I could see two bottles in Dan’s sack. Dan shook hands with me, and we both sat down. Dan seemed eager to go over the field notes from yesterday and made some helpful comments about a few words that I had misinterpreted due to sound distortions. After the review, Dan was ready for interviewing. I told him that I would like to find out more about why he came to Waco.

“I’m here ‘cause of my daughter and her mother. I care about both of them, and I get to see my grandkids too. Waco is okay. It’s about the same everywhere, so I have no complaints. I would rather be here than anywhere else.”

“So you’re here so that you can see your daughter and her kids and your *ex-wife*?” I emphasized the last word, and Dan noticed.

“Yep. My ex and I are close friends now. I go eat breakfast with her at Denny’s at least once a week, usually on Sunday before church.”

“When did you divorce?”

“In 1977. Janet was a child then.”

“Did she ever remarry?”

“Yep. She just got married to a guy named Dan, like me.” Dan grinned.

“Has she been single all this time, or did she marry someone before her current husband?”

Dan petted Tia and stoked her neck. “She’s been single all this time. She had a boyfriend for a couple of months before this one, but that’s all.” Dan paused and then, as

if the following were explanatory: “She’s a hard worker and it’s hard gettin’ by. She takes her role seriously. She’s a good woman.”

“Dan, why did you two divorce?”

“She drank as nearly as bad as me. After we split, she still drank pretty heavy. But she went through alcohol rehab in ’84. Been sober ever since. She used to go to AA. Like I said, we’re good friends now.”

“Dan, how often do you see Janet?”

“I see her about once a month, when I see her mom. We meet at Denny’s usually. We have a good relationship. She brings the kids, and I get to see ‘em.”

“Is she [Janet] married to her *first* husband?”

“They’ve been divorced for some time now. Right after her divorce she started drinking to cope and got a DWI like me. But she’s okay now. She just got married again--to a cop!”

“Did you get to go to the wedding?”

“Nah, but I helped her. She and her mother could not afford a wedding, so I bought her a wedding dress. Cost over \$300.”

“I bet she was happy and very appreciative that you were there to help her at that very important event.”

Dan nodded and stroked Tia.

“Have you helped her in other ways?”

“I moved here to be close to both of them. I give her money for things for the kids.” Dan paused, as if recollecting, “She was really sick about a year ago, and I kept

her kids for a week. My grandkids like me and we have fun together. I don't drink when I'm around them."

"Dan, would it be okay if I took your photo now?"

"Sure, as long as you take me with Tia." Dan called Tia to him and he positioned her front paws in his lap.

After the shot, I exchanged farewells with Dan and wished them both a good day. Dan said something about flying the sign before he would return to The Cane Thicket for the evening.

Chapter 13: Apprenticeship

Two weeks passed, and I was able to visit and interview Dan on five occasions. As always, Dan was available to assist me in reviewing my field notes from the previous day, and he was able to correct a few mistakes in transcription. I began to admire more Dan's ability to recollect things that we had said, sometimes several days before. There is the perception of the general public and among alcohol counselors in particular, that alcoholics suffer from blackouts or have difficulty in remembering things due to being under the influence or having brain cells permanently impaired or damaged due to excessive alcohol consumption. Perhaps Dan had impairment in other cognitive processes, but I was unable to witness this in regard to recollections of memories.

Since my first meeting with Dan, I had begun to grow my beard and hair, and to neglect shaping them up. Colleagues and friends were commenting on my appearance, usually in jest, but I was determined to spend a weekend with Dan and also to try my hand at "flying the sign." I packed a few items in a duffle bag, including twenty packages of trail mix. My sleeping bag lay beside three gallons of water in the living room, as I donned clothes appropriate for my task. I found a pair of faded, torn jeans, three old t-shirts, an old, Yellow Freight cap, gray in color, three changes of socks and underwear, and an old blue-jean jacket. My only toiletries included toothbrush, toothpaste, and a roll of toilet paper. A box of scented baby wipes completed my ensemble of provisions for the weekend. As I looked in the mirror in the privacy of my

own home, I was able to convince myself that motorists would view me as a homeless man.

It was on Thursday, April 30, and it would soon be getting dark. Dan was expecting me at The Cane Thicket at 6:00 p.m., and I was aware for the first time that I'd been procrastinating. During the twenty-minute drive from my home, I experienced some remarkable anxiety about what would ensue over the next three days. I remember explaining to family, friends, and colleagues about my new look, that I was a participant observer among homeless men, and that I wished to blend in. But I told no one of what I was about to do: spend the weekend in a homeless camp and beg on a street corner. The truth is that I would have been embarrassed telling this to anyone. And I had a certain fear of being discovered by someone I knew. I envisioned being disgraced or discredited in some way, and I became paranoid about how this might affect my reputation in the community and at work.

Forty-five minutes later, I parked my car at the Sam's Club parking lot, grabbed all my provisions, and began walking toward The Cane Thicket. The three gallons of water were quite heavy to lug, yet I considered that my most valuable resource. Within a few feet of me, cars and trucks whished by on the highway and occasionally on the access road. I pretended to be a homeless man, hoping that no one I knew would recognize me. I found the entrance to Dan's camp and followed the footpath winding in and out of trees, bushes, and foliage. I heard Tia bark as I was about to enter the alcove. Within seconds, Dan was quieting his watchdog, and greeting me.

“Hey, c’mon in! I thought you might chicken out!” Dan was a highly perceptive man.

Dan was in a good mood, and he always made me feel comfortable with his conversation. When one is alone and vulnerable, out in the elements without protection, he is forced to adapt in ways to insure his survival. Dialogues and greetings, spoken in certain ways and with certain inflections, may convey friendliness and goodwill to intruders. The effect upon finding Dan was one of relief. And I had feelings of friendship and comradeship because of my peculiar surroundings and predicament of the moment. I recalled how mundane and ordinary Americans seem to be as I go about my daily business, but how precious and intriguing they become when I am in Mexico, in an environment that is somewhat alien to my everyday experience. In those moments I have an uncanny appreciation for Americans. In the same way, I felt a kinship with Dan, and this feeling helped to overcome a lot of the anxiety that I was experiencing.

“Plan to stay here permanently?” Dan grinned, purveying my large duffle bag, sleeping bag, and jugs of water. As I looked at my property and then at Dan’s, I realized that I had more property than he. It’s true that my sleeping bag was bulkier, compared to his bedroll, but then Dan also did not tote water and he had no bag at all, just a plastic grocery bag filled with a few items. I thought how ironic it was that I would have so many possessions for a short three-day stint when the man who lived here permanently had much less.

“Dan, how is it that I have so much stuff with me and you don’t?”

Dan chuckled. “That’s because you’ve never lived out here. You gotta travel light. Any extra can be a liability.” Dan stoked Tia’s neck as she lay beside him.

“Hmm. Here’s my stuff that I thought was essential, you know, bare bones stuff. I have, well, I have three gallons of water. . . .”

Dan interrupted me. “What do you need water for? There’s two stores a couple of minutes away.”

“Well, I wanted to--hmm--I don’t know.” I had reasons for bringing the water, I was sure. I wanted to brush my teeth. I did not wish to get dehydrated. I might need some water to wash my hands. But every time I thought of a use, I realized that I could get along without it and that if it were an emergency (a water emergency) then I’d be within a short walking distance from the nearest store. “Well, you’re right. What do I need water for?” I laughed, and Dan just grinned.

“Don’t get me wrong. Water’s important. But you have to choose when you want to carry it. You don’t need it here.”

I showed Dan the rest of the items in my duffle bag: my changes of t-shirts and underwear, toothbrush, tooth paste, and baby wipes.

Dan remarked, “I wear all my clothes on me, unless it gets too hot, then I just roll up the extra shirts in my bed roll here.” I remembered Dan telling me how he layered his shirts underneath his jacket. “I’ve got some possessions, but they’re all in my pockets. Easier to carry.” Dan showed me all the pockets on his jacket.

“What’s in the bag? Food?” I pointed to the plastic bag hanging from a tree limb.

“Yeah. After the food’s gone, I keep the bag.”

I looked down at my sleeping bag. “Now this is rather cumbersome to carry around.”

“It’s nice,” Dan responded, “But it’s too cumbersome, right. Don’t get me wrong. It could come in handy in the winter, but that’s why I layer my clothes. In the summer, it will be too hot anyway, and you won’t need it.”

“Well, I also thought that, being enclosed and all, it would help protect me from insects and snakes and other varmints.” I tried to justify, to some extent, my choice of a sleeping bag.

Dan just grinned, and to some degree, I was glad he didn’t counter my answer.

“What do you do? Have you ever been pestered with critters?”

“Well, just fire ants, but I just sling some jelly somewhere and they don’t bother me.” I remembered that Dan showed me a handful of small jelly packages that he would get from Denny’s, where he would visit his ex-wife.

“What about snakes and mice, other kinds of bugs?”

“I don’t recall ever having that problem. Now men, there’s some varmints you have to be careful about. That’s why I’d rather you not tell anyone where my camps are. All that property you’re carrying around. Well, that’s just more stuff to get lost or stolen. And they’ll try to steal your booze too and your wallet.”

I turned off my tape recorder, and Dan and I reviewed my field notes from our previous encounter. As we were going over the notes, I noticed that Dan seemed more tired than usual and his comments had to be solicited more. After the review, Dan showed me the best place to lie, and within minutes he was snoring. It had become dark,

and I was surprised that I had not noticed. There was a beam of light shining into the camp from a security light about fifty yards away, beyond a small creek bed. The ground was still damp from thunderstorms the week before, but there were no standing puddles. I snuggled up inside my sleeping bag and listened to the whishing sound of passing motorists a short distance away. I realized that I was somewhat fearful of crawling insects, rodents, and snakes finding me in the night. I had camped before, but always with the extra protection of a tent in a specified campground. I was alarmed when my cell phone rang. Startled, Tia jumped up and barked. I noticed the caller ID and decided that I didn't need to answer. I turned off my cell phone and instead of returning it to my belt stirrup, placed it in my duffle bag beside me. I noticed that Dan's snoring had continued as before without interruption.

I awoke several times during the night, twice to relieve myself, and a few times, I figured, because my body was not used to sleeping on the ground. I was glad for the extra padding of the sleeping bag, but it was still not as good as my bed. It had gotten cooler during the night, and I estimated the temperature to be in the upper 50s. Before each venture to the edge of the alcove, I would inspect my shoes to insure that no bugs were in them. On my second trip I noticed that Dan had stopped snoring, and I looked in his direction to make sure that he was still there. I thought of how irrational my fears were. One was that Dan might leave me alone during the night, as if Dan could help me in a time of distress or camp invasion by unwanted visitors. I at least took comfort in the thought that Tia would warn off any would-be intruders and also alert me to their presence.

I awoke for the last time after 7:00 a.m. I sat up and noticed that Dan was sitting, drinking a Magnum.

“Sleep well?” I appreciated Dan’s pleasant tone.

“Yeah, better than I thought I would. I probably lay awake for about an hour or two before I drifted off. I got up several times last night. It got colder. You seem to have slept through all night.”

“I got up three times to drink. Got the shakes.” I remembered Dan’s telling me that he could not make it through the night without booze, because he would go into DT’s.

“I didn’t even know.”

“I checked on you, though.” Dan grinned. “You were okay.”

“Did you know when I got up last night? I got up a few times.”

“Nope.”

“How long have you been awake, Dan?”

“I get up with the sun. Learned that in the service. I don’t need much sleep anyway. Ready to go flying?”

“This early?”

“Friday’s a good time, because some guys are getting off night shift and they just got paid and feeling generous. The others are going to work but thinking about their paycheck they’re gonna get and feeling good too. You can make some good money when people are in the mood. But we don’t wanna wait too long, because it’s getting close to 8.”

Dan had already rolled up his bed and was ready to go. I had been putting on my shoes as I was talking to Dan, and so I stood up and rolled my sleeping bag.

“Anything bother you in the night?” Dan grinned.

“No. Well, at least, not that I’m aware of.” We both chuckled. I retrieved my toothbrush, tooth paste, and carried them, along with a jug of water to the edge of the camp and brushed my teeth. When I finished, I turned around and noticed that Dan was standing at the edge of the entrance to the camp, with his bedroll under his arm, and Tia at his side. I hurriedly got my provisions together and followed Dan, re-emerging on the streets.

I thought to myself, “Today is the first day of my apprenticeship!” And a dull pain began to gnaw in the pit of my stomach, a reaction to the anxiety and fear of what awaited me on the street corner. It was Friday morning, May 1. I judged the temperature to be in the upper 60s already. It was a cloudy day with a percentage of rain in the forecast. The noise of the passing motorists became louder as we re-emerged into the hustle and bustle of the thoroughfares. I followed Dan along the edge of the service road, and as we got closer to Dan’s “office,” I decided to voice some of my anxiety about flying the sign.

“Dan, I think I’ll watch you first and maybe try my hand at it when the traffic dies down after 8.”

“Sure, but I gotta run them off first.” I looked in the direction of Dan’s corner and saw the salt and pepper team that Dan had pointed out to me on an earlier day. I wondered how Dan would “run them off” without starting some type of fight. As we

came nearer to them, they looked rougher and more thuggish. I had some apprehensions about being present were a knife fight to break out between us and them. I began to envision being arrested and spending hours in jail with criminals and ne'er-do-wells. But as we got closer, I noticed that they began to walk away. I was relieved.

“Saw us coming,” explained Dan.

We crossed the street during the red light phase of the controlled intersection. The cars and trucks were stacked back ten cars long. I had the uncanny sensation of being watched by a hundred, scrutinizing eyes. When we reached the median, I turned off my tape recorder as Dan said, “You go on. Catch ‘ya later.” I crossed the remaining lanes and followed the path to Day Camp. I had an uneasy sensation that there might be someone in the camp, and I wouldn’t know what to do. As I got closer, I could not see anyone and felt some relief. Before I entered camp, I looked back at Dan as he was getting a lick out the window.

I sat on the bucket in Day Camp and watched Dan get licks. I was somewhat ashamed with some of the feelings I was having. I thought about how my identity and feelings of self worth were being threatened. What had really changed about me? Wasn’t I still the same essential person with a certain character? Isn’t this that made me unique, what gave me an identity? I was posing as a homeless man, a man without a job, without property, without a home. Were these things essential ingredients in one’s sense of identity and self worth? I thought about Dan. He seemed to be at ease with who he was. What was different about Dan and me?

Another feeling that was surfacing was shame. Was I ashamed to be thought of as a man like Dan? I thought of the study of Goode and Preissler (1990) with “fat admirers,” men who preferred the company and romance of obese women, but who felt the stigma of “guilt by association.” These men would encounter fat women covertly so that their activities could not be monitored by others. They sought to manage stigma in this way. This phenomena, I thought, is relevant for those participating in all deviant lifestyles. There are the gays who hide “in the closet.” There may be a point in time when they come “out of the closet,” but this event entails some resolution of one’s identity and feelings of self worth. I concluded that Dan had already dealt with such important issues, and I, of course, as an observer, had not.

An hour later, the temperature continued to rise. I guessed it was already in the mid-70s, and it was humid. The winds were light. I watched Dan as he flew. His sign was part of his property, and Dan had remarked on an earlier occasion that he rolled it up at night, his cardboard sign, in his bedroll. I watched Dan as he approached a pickup truck with a camper. That was his fifth lick, if I had witnessed all of them. The traffic light continued, with automatic precision, to change back and forth. The ebb and flow of traffic was diminishing. Dan then crossed the street with Tia in the direction of Shims’ store. I watched him go inside, and within minutes he was re-emerging with a sack and walking his familiar path to Day Camp.

“Ahoy in camp!” Dan was in a humorous mood.

I greeted him back. “Hey! C’mon in. How much you make?”

“Thirteen bucks and a doughnut. Got enough for the day!”

“I didn’t see you get the doughnut.”

“I gave it to Tia. I don’t like sweets. But I always take what’s offered. That’s good for business.”

“How many licks you get?”

“Six.” Dan sat down on the other bucket. “Are you ready to find out what it’s like?” Dan sat his sack down and retrieved a Magnum. I could see that he had three others in the sack. “Want one?”

“No thanks. I don’t drink before noon. That way I know I’m not an alcoholic.”

Dan appreciated the humor and laughed. “Well, there’s no doubt about me.”

I had avoided Dan’s question about flying, but I knew that I had to do it. “Dan, I guess I’m ready. What was it like when you first flew the sign?”

“After I was court-martialed, I met ‘Fessor Tom in Reno. I was going to come to Waco, but I was delayed a couple of years. He taught me how to run dumpsters, pick cans, fly the sign. That was in ‘86. Didn’t make it to Waco ‘til 1988.” Dan stood up and stretched. He looked in the direction of the median. Tia stood up and looked at him in anticipation. But he just stood there and continued to talk with me. She then sat down while still studying him.

“So you received your apprenticeship from ‘Fessor Tom--for a period of two years.”

“Yeah, you could say that. He was a good teacher, but it was three months [in the hospital] before he died.” Dan sat down, picked up his bottle, and took another swig.

“So what’s it like out there flying the sign?”

“The only way you’re gonna find out is to do it *yourself*. I’ll admit that when I first did it, in Reno, I was nervous and felt embarrassed. But it doesn’t bother me anymore. The only thing that bothers me is when they dis me.”

I sensed that the time was right for my debut. I felt as if I were going on stage to perform in front of an audience. As I walked to the median, I thought about how what Dan did was, in fact, a performance. And I thought of Goffman’s dramaturgical concept of impression management, how we seek to manage others’ impressions of us by our garb, our gait, our body language, our style of communication (1963). And I thought of how Dan’s behavior conveys a model of deference, wherein he is polite and appreciative. He plays his subordinate role well: he wishes to be seen as *beneath* his clients, in a sense. He wishes for them to see the contrast in order to gain sympathy.

And there are avoidance rituals wherein the actor keeps at a distance from his benefactor, so as not to infringe on his privacy (Goffman 1956). Motorists have their encapsulated personal space in and around their vehicles. If one approaches his personal space, then the motorist becomes uncomfortable, nervous, and fearful. In a sense, the encounter between beggar and motorist is unfair, because the motorist cannot avoid the encounter. Dan takes advantage of this vulnerability. He must become visible and present himself. He must play his part in order to benefit from the encounter, but he must not overstep his bounds and become odious.

And so I reached the median, but I realized that I had no sign! I faced back to return to Day Camp when I heard the words behind me, “Hey!” Startled, I thought, “What did I do? I haven’t done anything wrong.” I turned to see an arm hanging outside

the window of a car, and in an outstretched hand was a bill. I approached the car with some trepidation and nervousness. “Here ya go!” The voice was kind and reassuring. I took the dollar bill, and the motorist turned away as if viewing the street ahead. But he was not moving; he was waiting for his light to change. I said, “Thank you,” but the motorist preferred not to respond. The encounter had begun while I was absorbed with the ideas of Goffman. I then left the median and headed toward Day Camp, clutching my prize. When I arrived, Dan congratulated me, “Hey, got your first lick!”

“Yeah, and I wasn’t even trying. I realized that I didn’t have a sign.”

“All you gotta do is stand out there. You don’t even have to say anything. I like that part. When you’re on the street, you don’t hafta say anything or do *anything*!” Dan wanted me to understand this aspect of begging as if he’d learned this truth the hard way. “Here’s my sign. You can use it. Other street people have used it. I was wondering when you’d come get it, and then you got a lick!” Dan was grinning. “Now when you go out there, you gotta look the part. Slump over like this. Just look straight at them but don’t approach ‘em. They’re liable to get angry at ya. Just stand there and wait. You can take Tia with you if you want. People feel more sorry for ya if you have a dog.”

“I might use her later, but thanks anyway.”

“Sure, whatever it takes. You’ll see what works.”

I had the feeling that I was a scientist performing an experiment, which made the time go by better. For what seemed like an eternity I stood on the median and waited. It was tiring, standing there with little movement, waiting. It was getting warmer and the air was thick with humidity, and I was sweating and becoming more uncomfortable. I

did not wish to take off my blue-jean jacket, however, because I thought of it as part of my uniform. I was about to return to base camp, somewhat disappointed with my luck. When I had first arrived at the median, I began to count cars to pass the time, and I had a curiosity about the frequency of licks I'd get per number of cars. But then I had lost count at some point. I estimated that I'd seen about fifty cars during this time, and I was coming up empty handed. "I must be doing something wrong," I thought to myself. I looked back at Dan, but could not see him behind the foliage. A screech of tires got my attention, and I noticed a lady motorist handing me something. I quickly approached her, taking what was offered, and thanked her. She sped off after replying, "You're welcome!" It was a religious, evangelical tract outlining how to be saved, and underneath were 2 one-dollar bills.

I was excited as I made my way to Day Camp. As I got closer, I could see Dan seated on a bucket. "Got a lick!" remarked Dan.

"Yeah, I got two dollars and a religious tract too."

"I get those all the time. Anyone who's down on his luck needs religion, I guess. But you gotta be appreciative of everything they give ya."

I looked at my watch for the first time and noticed that about ninety minutes had passed. "It's only 10:15! It sure seemed longer!"

"You gotta do something with your time or you can get bored. I never stand out there very long."

"Dan, am I doing something wrong? I only got one lick in the past hour and a half."

“No, you’re doing okay. You can’t predict what’s gonna happen out there. Sometimes it’s like I’m fishing and I hit a whole school of fish, biting at the same time. Sometimes nothin’s biting. That’s the way it is. But today is a good day. They just haven’t got paid yet. Come 2:30 on, your luck will change.”

“Dan, tell me all the towns where you practiced your skills at begging while you were with ‘Fessor Tom.”

Dan smiled while petting Tia. “Let’s see. I met ‘im in Reno. From there we rode in a box car back to Sacramento. It was my first time to be homeless like that. But ‘Fessor Tom took me under his wing and taught me everything I know. When we got there it was still dark, and we just waited till morning before we left the train. I remember it was very hot, it was late September, and I had to get used to everything.”

“What were some of the things you had to get used to?”

“Well, not being clean, the smell of other hobos, not having a place to go to every night, not having a bathroom. You learn to adjust and make do. This is really a good life once you get used to it.”

“So how long did you stay in Sacramento? What did y’all do there?”

“Not long. We stayed there a couple of days. That’s all. ‘Fessor Tom taught me how to run dumpsters for food. There are restaurants--fancy ones--that throw out perfectly good food. You just have to know where they are and when to hit ‘em, ‘cause there’s others who know this too.”

“Are you referring to other hobos?”

“Street people. ‘Fessor Tom was a *hobo*. He rode trains like on a circuit. That’s a hobo to me.”

“Where did you go from there?”

“From there we went to Fresno, then, let’s see, Bakersfield and Santa Barbara. We didn’t stay long in any of those places. ‘Fessor Tom just wanted to visit some of his buddies.”

“Did you learn any other skills in these towns?”

“He taught me how to pick cans and sell ‘em for cash. That was in Santa Barbara. We got a lot of exercise.” Dan stood up and stretched before continuing.

“Oh yeah, we stayed two days in L.A. He was looking for some friends who lived there, but we didn’t find ‘em.”

“Where did you stay while you were there?”

“The first night we slept under an overpass. There were a lot of street people there, but we couldn’t find ‘Fessor Tom’s friend.”

I became excited. I recalled that Underwood’s ethnography of Jerry began in 1987. I started to ask Dan if he met a man named Jerry, but then realized that the name was fictional.

Dan continued, “That was the first time I’d ever slept on concrete. It started out okay. We met a couple, a man and his wife, and they asked if we’d go get them some wine if they gave us the money. I guess we looked honest. I dunno. So ‘Fessor Tom and I go to this store about a quarter-mile away and bought three bottles of cheap wine. One for them. Two for us. And we headed back. We had a good time socializing with ‘em.

Street people are just like anybody else in some respects. We enjoy good company and we tell good stories.”

“Do you tell stories of places you’ve been? Do these people travel a lot around the country?”

“Sometimes. But the best stories are what happen with the police, or accidents, stabbings, DWI’s, stuff that happens right at home.” Dan chuckled before continuing. “Most street people don’t travel much. They stay right where they are. Traveling is risky. It’s safer to stay at home.”

I thought of how incongruous it was to hear of “homeless” people staying at “home.” I asked, “Dan, do you think of homeless people having a home?”

“I don’t like the word ‘homeless.’ *Street people* have homes--their camps--and they usually live there all their lives. We might travel to another city when we get bored, but not any more than people with ‘homes’ do. We go visit friends in other places. But we usually return to our camps. But I’m talking about street people, not hobos.”

“Okay. So did you stay under the overpass for two days?”

“No. We woke up the next morning and our bottles were empty. ‘Fessor Tom was having the shakes. So we went back to the store. Then we ran some dumpsters. That night we found a field behind a motel that was all grown up with weeds and bushes. We had a cold spell that night, and it got down pretty low. Sometimes at night the Salvation Army will bring you blankets and give ‘em to ya to keep. But it didn’t get that cold that night.”

“When you say the Salvation Army, do you mean in any place they do that or just in L.A.?”

“I’ve heard of ‘em doing it everywhere. They gave me and ‘Fessor Tom blankets in Seattle. It got really cold there. I know of some men who have died without blankets.”

*At dawn, the underpass quavers
With whine and whoosh, awaking
Dan and ‘Fessor Tom.*

*Dan rubs thin, bruised sinews
And shudders from the stabbing
Wintry blast. Bottle’s gone.*

*Long past sundown, Dan and comrade
Sit in the field, backs to the north,
Guzzling vodka, telling yarns of*

*Days past. At midnight, Army
Volunteers blanket the dreaming
Travelers with soiled fleece. (F. B.)*

“Where did y’all go after L.A., Dan?”

“‘Fessor Tom was a very intelligent man. He knew a lot about survival. From there, from there we went north to Oregon and Washington and Canada. He taught me how to beg in Eugene. It was hard for me at first. You get a lot of rejections, and you have to deal with it. And people will just ignore you like you’re nobody. The first time was at a used car lot. I watched him walk up to a couple who was looking at a car. He came back with \$5 in his hand. I asked him what he said to them. He said he told ‘em that his friend over there--me--was sick and that he had to call a cab and take me to the hospital. He said that this was a good line if you’re with someone.”

“So he lied?”

“Yep.”

“Does that bother you to lie?”

“Yeah, that’s why I don’t do it. I tell the truth. If it’s not good enough, then someone else will find it good enough. Like my sign here. I don’t say on it ‘Will Work for Food’ or any crap like that, ‘cause I won’t.”

“But the Hollywood that you spoke of. Isn’t that a form of lying?”

“Hollywood is an act. If you call acting a lie, then it is. But I don’t think of it as lying. People act all the time, but I wouldn’t call it lying. And lying makes people angry. What I do makes people feel good. They feel good when they give.”

“I see your point.” I finished off my Pepsi and set it down. “So back to Eugene. Did you learn how to beg there?”

“Yep. The first time I begged I was afraid. I walked up to a man in a restaurant parking lot. He saw me coming toward him, and I could tell he was getting uneasy about it. Which didn’t help me none. I told him, ‘Sir, I wonder if you could spare me a dollar.’ And I expected him to say, ‘Hell no, get a job!’ But he reached in his billfold and gave me a ten. Shocked the hell outta me. Then he got in his Mercedes and drove off. I was feeling pretty good after that. ‘Fessor Tom was waiting for me over a little slope. We went and got some cheap wine and celebrated.”

“So did you ever get rejected when you asked for money?”

“Oh yeah, most of the time I did. Some people will downright tell you ‘No!’ or ‘Leave us alone!’ But most people will just ignore you like you’re not even there. Some

will even act embarrassed that a bum would ask 'em for a dollar. I found all that pretty stressful. But I did it in Eugene, in Portland, and in Seattle and in Vancouver. I got better at it, but I always felt like peeing in my pants afterward. And I took a lot of abuse for it too.”

“Excuse me while I go pee.” Dan began walking over to the edge of the camp while Tia just watched, unmoved. After Dan was finished, he came back and asked if I were hungry. I replied that I wasn’t and offered him some of my trail mix. Dan declined, stating that he wasn’t really hungry. “Sometimes I don’t eat but once a day. As long as I’ve got my malt liquor, I’m okay. But I think I’ll go get Tia something at Shims’.” I was about to accompany Dan, but he asked if I would stay in camp with Tia. “She waits for me at the door, but I think it makes the owners nervous, like she’s gonna run off their customers or something. I would prefer she just wait for me, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh no, I would be happy to stay here with her.” With that said, I turned off my recorder.

Dan told Tia to wait in camp until he returned. She seemed to understand and did not attempt to follow him as he left camp. After Dan returned, he decided to go fly. The traffic was beginning to thicken again, and Dan was anxious to show me how much he could make. I watched Dan and Tia head for the median.

For the next hour, Dan got thirteen licks and came back with \$22, three bean and cheese burritos, and a box of chicken wings. When he returned, I could tell that he was happy with his good fortune. “Look what I made out the window. I got \$22 and supper. He laid the box of chicken wings on the ground and allowed Tia to eat. Then he sat down

and offered me a burrito. “I can’t eat all three of ‘em,” he remarked. But I declined the offer, stating that I might go fly while he and Tia ate supper. I was beginning to build up my courage again after the morning.

As I headed toward the median with sign in hand, I noticed I walked with less apprehension, but then questioned myself whether my new-found confidence was a good thing for my Hollywood.

Over the next forty minutes, I got four licks and made \$7. When I returned to camp, Dan remarked, “Now you’re gettin’ the hang of it! How does it feel?”

“Sounds like something a counselor would ask me.” Dan laughed at my remark. “It’s definitely educational, Dan.” I handed Dan the money I’d made that day. Dan was appreciative, thanked me, and accepted the gift.

“Ready to go back to The Thicket?” asked Dan. I noticed that he had bought some more Magnums at the store while I was away, probably enough to last the night.

Chapter 14: Rick

It was a mid-morning Sunday In May. The temperatures had been in the 90s for the past week, and today's forecast was to continue the trend. It was slightly windy and overcast. I parked my minivan a block from the Church under the Bridge in anticipation of meeting Dan there. I met a homeless man named Rick who was talking to someone in the back. Inasmuch as I could not locate Dan and the religious service did not start for another half hour, I decided to interview him. Rick was a forty-three year old, white male who had been in Waco for only three weeks. Rick looked older than his mid-forties, and I had witnessed this phenomenon with most street people. The only common denominator I could ascertain among those who did look older is that they drank heavily. It's true that living in outdoor camps, in the weather without protection, can leave its scars on the skin. Yet heavy alcohol consumption also figures into the equation. It is a well-known truth among alcohol counselors that the external features of alcoholics tend to age more quickly than that of social drinkers, regardless of one's residence status.

Rick was wearing a pair of jeans and athletic shoes. He wore a blue, wrinkled, button-collar shirt, only part of which was tucked in his pants. He stood in the back, sipping coffee out of a Styrofoam cup, and talking to another homeless man whom I had met on a prior occasion. When he spoke, I detected a non-Texas, regional dialect, probably Yankee, and several missing teeth. The teeth that he did have were dingy, and I detected a strong body odor. I suspected that Rick slept outside last night, and the heat

provided a catalyst for body bacteria to flourish. I was glad to be outside. Several people were unfolding chairs toward the front, and Rick seemed eager to talk to someone.

“So, Rick. You’ve been in Waco for about three weeks. Where were you before?”

“I came here from Tucson. I used to work in the aircraft industry--General Dynamics and a bunch of others--LTV there in Phoenix. I’ve been on the road since December 1996.”

“So you’ve been on the road through two winters?”

“Yeah, although my stay in Arizona wouldn’t really qualify as a winter. My worst winter was this one. I was working at that chicken hatchery--what paper are you doing this for?”

“Anthropology.”

“Anther- what?” Another man who was eavesdropping chimed in.

Rick looked at him and replied, “*Anthro-pology*. That’s the study of the human animal.” Rick looked back at me and continued, “You see, my wife majored in anthropology. She was going for her Ph.D. in clinical psychology when we broke up. We had nothing to talk about. And about that time I started driving a cab.”

“I see. So what are some other towns you’ve been in, Rick?”

“Wichita Falls. I was in Harlingen just a short while ago. I was in Tucson for a good while, and I was in Phoenix two weeks before I left to go to Wichita Falls. I would have stayed there at the chicken ranch, but the boss’ son came back, and his son was twenty-two. The boss was just my age, just a week apart. His son just came back from

California, but he just got his girlfriend pregnant. No job. No place to live. No money. And so he gave the job to his son. I told 'im, 'I understand.'" Rick sighed and took another sip of his coffee.

"How long did you work at the chicken ranch?"

"Middle of October to the middle of February. Was the worst weather. I enjoyed it. I'm a high desert man at heart. Especially since I grew up in Buffalo, New York. There you are on a chicken ranch with no tree breaks and no buildings, and it's cold."

"Rick, where do you sleep at night?"

"Out in the park--Fort Fisher and Indian Springs."

"So do you have money? How are you surviving from day to day?"

"I fly the sign. There's money in it. I just got started. I got down there on the street corner *last* Sunday morning, and I drank to get a little courage. And I had \$8 before the hour was up. I had seen some guys in Phoenix sittin' out there with their wives and what have you, and they always made good money. I started running around with them and hanging around skid row and found they could make some money. Beats standing around the labor hall."

"When did you meet the gentlemen who just asked about anthropology a while ago?" I pointed at a black man who looked in his mid-50s, sitting on a metal foldout chair.

"A couple of weeks ago. We were back in a field, drinking. He came stumbling in. There was a whole bunch of cardboard there, and he says, 'Here's my bed.' Man, he

was drunk! We got to talking, and it was only a day or two after that he introduced me to flying.”

“Was it *his* first time to fly?”

“No. He’s been doing it awhile.”

“Did he give you any pointers? Like the words that you write on the sign. Are some words better than others?”

“I’m not a *vet* and I’m not *disabled*, but I’ll say anything if they’ll give me money.”

“What about: Will Work for Food?”

“Not me, because I won’t work for food. If I work, I want *money* for it. And I *will work*. There was one guy who offered me a job, wanted me to go clean his apartment, but he was kinda strange.”

“Hmm. I see. So what do you write on your sign?”

“Homeless. Please help.” Rick jerked his head around in the direction of squealing tires a block away. “Okay,” he remarked to himself.

“Are there certain things you do to get people to give you money besides hold a sign?”

“Like what do you mean?”

“Well, for example, your style of dress.”

“Actually, I’m wearing expensive clothes. \$40 jeans and \$60 sneakers. 501 jeans. I got these through donations through the Church. I wear these clothes. I don’t know if it makes a difference. But I see your point. I get some slow days where people

aren't giving, and I can't figure it out." Rick looked down and kicked the ground with one shoe as if pondering about it.

"How much money do you make per day?"

"I can go days without getting much. Then every once in a while, I make \$10 from one person. Some people make \$20 to \$25 dollars a day. With that they can buy tobacco and some booze."

"Do you also buy food with the money?"

"There's always places like the Salvation Army and you can get food stamps. This town has one of the best feedings."

"What's the average amount of money per handout?"

"Probably a dollar. What I've seen mostly is folding money, although you can sit out there for two hours and get ninety cents worth of change."

"So what's the most you ever got flying the sign?"

"Nine bucks. That was in the evening, was a week ago Friday. That was enough to buy some beer."

"So how much beer do you drink a day?"

"Four 32-ouncers. But if everything works out for me tonight, somebody'll give me a fifth of Jack Daniels! Hey, I'm going for some more coffee. It's about to start. Want some?"

I thanked Rick for the offer and for the interview. The church service was indeed starting, but Dan was nowhere to be seen. I decided to drive to Denny's to see if I could locate Dan there. Dan would meet with his ex-wife, a waitress at Denny's, every

Sunday morning before attending Church under the Bridge. Perhaps he was running late.

I decided to drive down the service road on the way in the event that Dan was already walking toward church.

Chapter 15: Dark Night of the Soul

I drove down the service road in the direction of Denny's, looking for Dan. Perhaps he was late for church and was walking along the road, and I would be able to give him a lift. It was a little past 11:00 a.m. I drove into Denny's parking lot and looked inside, but I could not see Dan. I decided to drive to Dan's camps. I first drove beside Shims' store, parked my minivan, and followed the trail down to Day Camp. About ten yards away, I heralded my approach in characteristic fashion. But there was no response, and I entered the camp to find no one. The camp was littered, as usual, with paper and bottles, and the buckets were turned upside down.

So I retraced my steps to my minivan, drove to the Sam's Club parking lot, and began walking in the direction of The Cane Thicket. I recalled spending last weekend with Dan. It had rained on Saturday, May 2, and Dan and I were forced to find shelter under the overpass of the interstate highway. Sheets of rain, pushed by intermittent gusts of wind, had created a staccato effect, marking the passage of minutes and hours during the long night. The wind, saturated with moisture, coupled with temperatures in the upper 50s, had brought a chill to our cement environment, and I was glad that I had had a sleeping bag instead of merely a bedroll.

I entered The Cane Thicket with some trepidation. The canes and trees and foliage were perfect visual barriers to the camp, and I did not wish to intrude upon strangers. I walked slowly, listening, and at last I entered the alcove, only to find no occupants. I was puzzled about Dan's whereabouts, and I began to fear that something

may have happened to him. Dan was very dependable about appointments, and he had an excellent memory. I had told him a week ago of my intentions of meeting him at the Church under the Bridge. Dan had said that he would be there.

I decided to return to Denny's and see if I could locate Dan's ex-wife. I had not met her before, but I felt that I could identify or locate her, and I was successful. She matched Dan's description: tall, mid-40s, red hair, and shapely built. While pretending to wait for a table I spotted her and asked another waitress if I could speak with Wanda. As Wanda approached me, I could see rings under her red eyes. She looked exhausted and preoccupied. I introduced myself to her and told her that I was looking for Dan. She got a waitress to cover for her, and we sat down for coffee. She lit up a cigarette while sitting at the booth, but before she sat down, she stood up again and looked toward her group of tables to see if her replacement were taking care of the patrons' needs. She sighed deeply.

I explained privacy and informed consent issues with her rather briefly and told her that I'd been spending time with Dan for about six weeks. She replied that Dan had already spoken of me, and that she'd wanted to meet me. She said that after she arrived at work at 5:45 this morning, she received a phone call from a unit secretary at Hillcrest Hospital ER. She said that Dan had been taken to ER last night, but that he was stabilizing, and that he wanted her to know he would not make his meeting with her today. Wanda said that she left work and went to ER to check on him, and that she returned to work around 8:30 a.m. Dan had experienced seizures brought on by DT's.

“I have a good boss here, and he’s sympathetic. I’m a very good worker, dependable.” She took a puff from her cigarette and sighed. “I just don’t like to miss work, because the other girls have to cover for me.”

“So how did Dan get to the hospital?”

“During his fits, he wandered out on the street and a man called the police, and then an ambulance came. It’ll run about \$300. Typical.”

“So this has happened before that you know of?”

“Yeah, a few. He keeps a running tab with Hillcrest and Providence. I asked him once, about two years ago, if I could help pay his bill, but he wouldn’t hear of it. I think you can go visit Dan if you want. His daughter is probably already there, and you could visit with her. I’m sure she’d appreciate it. We’re the only two people who would show up, so it’d surprise her.”

“Her name is Janet, right?”

“Yeah.” Wanda’s countenance lifted when I mentioned her daughter’s name.

“She loves her father dearly, and the kids love him too. I imagine they’re there with her.”

I talked a few minutes more about Dan and his relationship to Wanda, Janet, and his grandchildren. Wanda related that Dan was a good man, that they’d had their problems in their marriage. She admitted that both of them had drinking problems and that they had met in a bar. “I guess you could say it was love at first sip,” she laughed. “Oh, I needed that.” And having said that, some of the concern and fatigue seemed to have been lifted. Wanda said that Dan would help her financially from time to time, but that he would not accept help from her when he needed it. “Of course, he usually doesn’t

need anything, being homeless and all. No bills.” She chuckled. “In some ways, he’s got it better than me, that’s for damn sure.”

I thanked Wanda for her time, and set an appointment to interview her further. She suggested we meet at Cracker Barrel on I35 at 8:00 a.m. on Monday.

When I got to Hillcrest, I went to ER but learned that Dan had been moved to a room. The door to his room was open, and I peered in. I first saw two small children sitting in chairs against the wall; a third, older girl was standing at the window, looking out. I turned on my small tape recorder that was attached to my wrist and stood in the doorway and knocked quietly. A tall, slim, attractive brunette was standing beside the bed. Neither she nor Dan was talking at the moment. She looked up, and Dan was the first to speak.

“Hey Floyd, c’mon in. This is my daughter, and these are my grandkids.”

I introduced myself to Janet and her children. The oldest was about twelve years old, the youngest around three.

“Dad’s already told me about you. In fact, he’s talked about you a couple of times.”

“You guys meet at Denny’s?”

“Yeah.” Janet was smiling and seemed to be in good spirits.

“I bet you were surprised to learn about your father.” I turned to Dan and asked, “Are you doing okay? Or are you just faking this to get attention?”

Dan grinned. “To get attention! And I got it too!”

Janet spoke, “Actually, I was coming up here anyway, because a friend of mine was in labor.”

Dan spoke, “She was gonna meet me this morning for breakfast and bring the kids . . .” Janet interrupted, “Yeah, but I got this *call* from *mom* . . .” She was talking in a humorous way, stressing the words.

“Well, I better be going,” remarked Janet, looking at her watch. “C’mon kids, let’s go see if Shirley had her baby yet.”

I thanked her for visiting with me and expressed a desire to talk to her at a later date. She seemed pleased that I would want to ask her questions about her father. After they left the room, I sat beside Dan. He seemed to be in fair spirits, but with a look of concern on his face. An IV tube was inserted into his left forearm.

Dan began. “Floyd. I had a bad night. Really bad. Started about two or three [a.m.], and I misplaced or lost my bottle. I don’t know what happened to it. I know no one stole it. My camp’s well hidden, even from bums.” Dan rubbed his forehead with his right hand. “I’m always real careful to have a bottle handy on Sunday. I don’t know. I was having nightmares with monsters and demons. My ex-wife and I were still married in these dreams, and she got hit by a bus and her head--she was decapitated. Damn! And I couldn’t get anyone to sew her head back on. I was having fits and could barely move. They say they found me in the street and brought me here. Hell, I don’t remember any of it.”

“Are you still having DT’s?”

“Nah, they got me on what they call a Librium *taper*. I’ve done this before. It does the trick.”

I could tell that Dan wanted to talk some more, so I sat and listened.

“That was the worst nightmare of my life. There was a lot of crazy stuff going on and when I woke up, there were king-size bugs and snakes--horrible looking creatures--crawling up my pant legs. I couldn’t get ‘em off me and I went completely, completely beserk. And I was screaming, and I know I saw my father.” Dan seemed to be in pain, recollecting everything. He paused, breathing slightly harder.

“Dan, just relax. Everything’s okay. It was just a dream.” After I said that, Dan looked at me, forced a smile, and nodded. “Can I get you anything?” Dan didn’t answer.

I sat there with him for awhile. Dan seemed to be recollecting the events of the night before in his mind. He finally muttered, “Floyd, I’m glad you’re here. I don’t have nobody. And I didn’t--I didn’t . . .” Dan stopped talking and looked at me. “Well, I’m glad you’re here.” He looked at my wrist. “Got it on?” He was referring to my tape recorder.

“Yeah, it’s on.” I checked to see how much tape was left. “It’s on,” I repeated. I sat with Dan for about fifteen minutes without talking, as he occasionally sipped ice water through a straw. “Floyd, I guess I’ll be sober awhile.” Dan’s announcement broke my reverie. “Usually when something like this happens, I sober up awhile.” He paused, as if reflecting. Looking toward the window, he added, “I’m sure gonna miss it.”

I returned to Dan’s side and looked at him. He had a look of resignation on his face.

“So what’s your plan? Where do you go from here?”

“Anywhere’s up from here,” exclaimed Dan, referring to the hospital. We both chuckled. “I know I can buy some time by staying off the bottle for awhile. I don’t wanna die just yet. Doctor tells me that my liver enzymes are not good, not good at all. We all gotta go sometime, but I’m not ready yet. I wanna spend more time with my family.”

“Dan, by family, do you mean Janet and the kids?”

“Yep. And Wanda too. I consider her family, and her husband has accepted me. I’ll go stay at New Hope for awhile. Get a job at the [sandwich] factory. Get a bike. But it’s only temporary.”

“Why do you say that, Dan? Is it impossible to stay sober?”

“No, it’s not impossible. I make my own choices. I choose to drink. But this job at the sandwich factory--it’s only temporary. My real job is flying the sign. You know that. It’s in my blood. I like the freedom. I was meant to fly the sign, and I know it.” Dan grinned and took another sip through his straw before continuing in a more somber note. “This last night was sheer terror. I need to back off of drinking for awhile. I nearly died too.”

“You mentioned seeing your father?”

“Yeah. It was pretty scary. He told me that I was going to die today!”

“Where did you see him Dan?”

“In The Thicket. I told you about all those critters crawling up my pant legs. And I was vomiting and had the shits. I would have welcomed death I felt so bad. And then, I

would see a flicker of light and then it'd disappear. And I would fight with those durned snakes and bugs. And I'd see a flicker again. Like something or someone was fadin' in and out. Then everything got real quiet, and I got really scared. And my head was swimmin'. And then the light faded back in, and it was my dad. I tried to call his name, but I couldn't speak."

Dan looked ostensibly shaken from having to recount the events of the day. He was shaking and sipping on his water. "Damn, you could hang meat in here!" cried Dan. I got a blanket from the chair where one of his grandchildren had sat and placed it over him while he shivered.

"Do you want me to get a nurse, Dan?"

Dan did not answer at first, and I was unsure if he'd heard me. "Dan?"

He interrupted, "Nah, I'm okay. I just need to get warm, that's all. I'm okay, Floyd."

I had decided to sit with Dan but not to talk about these things for now. I suspected that the recounting of Dan's ordeal was contributing to his anxious state, and I feared for his well-being.

"Dan, let's talk about something else for now. You need to recover and get to feeling better."

"No! I need to tell someone. Think I can tell *anyone* else about this? And after you leave, I'll be here all alone, and I need to get this off my chest."

I told Dan that before I agreed to listen further, he would need to get warm again and calm down. Dan agreed also. After twenty minutes, Dan was more relaxed. I closed

the door to his room and helped him urinate in a bottle beside the bed. He still was attached to his IV.

“I think that was part of the problem. These IV’s keep you going all the time, or at least make ya think you need to go.”

After a couple of minutes, Dan was ready to continue. “My dad was there all right, right in front of me.”

“Does he live close to here?”

“Well, he’s . . .” Dan hesitated. “He died a few years ago. But that was *him*. I guess it was his spirit.” Dan nibbled on some ice from his cup. “And everything got very quiet and pitch dark in the camp, except for him. He lit up like a lamp. It was eerie. I thought that I’d died and gone to him. And I tried to talk to him and tell him some things I needed to tell him. But I couldn’t, like I said. I couldn’t say anything. And I needed to. I was afraid that I was in hell. But then he said, ‘You’re gonna die now, son.’ So I knew I wasn’t dead yet. And the next thing I knew I was being wheeled out of ER to my room.”

Dan breathed deeply. I sensed that he experienced some relief from telling about his terrible ordeal. A nurse entered the room, bringing Dan a Librium. I stayed with Dan until late in the evening, and then bade him farewell until tomorrow. He appeared to be in better spirits.

Chapter 16: Vocation and Calling

“I’ll go stay at New Hope for awhile. Get a job at the [sandwich] factory. Get a bike. But it’s only temporary.”

“Why do you say that, Dan? Is it impossible to stay sober?”

“No, it’s not impossible. I make my own choices. I choose to drink. But this job at the sandwich factory. It’s only temporary. My real job is flying the sign. You know that. It’s in my blood. I like the freedom. I was meant to fly the sign, and I know it.” (Interview of May 10).

The history of *work* can be traced from hunting and gathering societies , but with the advent of the Neolithic Revolution, from 10,000-6,000 BCE in various regions, a food surplus allowed for the creation of specialization of labor. And with the increase in social complexity, specialization increased even more, although the type of work a person engaged in conformed to an existing, hierarchical, and rigid system that was largely hereditary. The periods of exploration and European colonization revamped the economic structures for work, and the rise of mechanization and factory labor in the Industrial Revolution created a plethora of specialized tasks in which one might work. Yet in all of this, the concept of *vocation* is not entertained, unless one has recourse to the idea in religious history. The concept of calling and vocation has been paired with the concept of work, although most workers in American society today use the concepts interchangeably, without regard to the special connotations of vocation. Thus it is common on some resumes to include a section entitled “Avocational Interests,” and the

religious overtones to the concept of vocation and calling are neither entertained nor suspected.

In Dan's mind, his activities on the street corner, begging for handouts, was *work* granted that his definition of "work" differs from that of the dominant society in which he lived. There are some general characteristics of work that most people, in any culture, can agree on. *First of all*, one expends energy. There is effort applied to the task at hand, whether one digs ditches, enters symbols on a keypad, parades an extra appendage in a circus, or stands on the street corner holding a sign. *Second*, there is a prize to be "earned," whether one is successful or not. In a money economy, it is usually cash or a paycheck, and sometimes one earns compensatory time that can be translated into something like cash. *Third*, one exercises skills in his activity according to procedures, learned though reading or through a period of apprenticeship, what one might term as "on the job training." *Fourth*, one may be required to wear some type of "uniform." This may consist of a specific-colored set of clothing or cap that varies only, among co-workers, with individualized nameplates. It may be a suit and tie, roughly meeting the current styles of fashion. It may be a more utilitarian ensemble, enhancing the work performance of the actor. It might be garb that meets a range of acceptable options for one's preferred profession. But then it might be the costume of the performer, such as a clown or actor. *Fifth*, there are hours devoted to the work, whether it is a forty-hour week, from eight to five, Monday through Friday, or some other schema of hours. For a door-to-door salesman, the hours may be outside of the eight-to-five scheme, due to the availability of clients for contact. *Sixth* one must have a clientele who receives services

in some way, and the worker must maintain some type of rapport with them. There are other features that may or may not be present in the phenomenon of work, such as ethics, a sense of pride in one's work, a sense of urgency in the performance of one's work, and a sense of vocation or calling.

My thesis is that Dan's activities meet all of the essential criteria for work, but that the confusion or disbelief expressed by some members of the dominant culture stems from elements not pertaining to the definition of work itself. The friction stems instead from peripheral issues, such as whether the activity is accepted by the dominant culture, and whether the rewards of one's labor are used in acceptable ways. Dan expends energy for money or goods. He uses certain skills that were learned during an apprenticeship and through personal experience, according to a set procedure. He wears a uniform that enhances his success. He works the hours when his clientele are available and quits work when his rewards are received. But Dan also manifests other qualities in regard to his work. He embraces a complex of personal ethics. Examples of this are receiving everything that is freely given, regardless of one's need, and writing words on a sign that convey what is true about the actor. Not everyone has a sense of urgency in his work, nor a sense of pride, nor of vocation. In Dan's case, however, all of these extra features are present.

Why is there conflict between some members of the dominant culture and members of Dan's subculture? Why do some people discriminate against Dan in various ways, such as yelling angrily, "Get a job, you lousy bum!" If Dan works, then why would he need to get a job? And why would people refer to members of Dan's

subculture as “homeless,” when they live in camps on a nearly permanent basis? Would our remote ancestors, such as *H. erectus*, be considered homeless if they lived in camps under the stars? Would cowboys of yesteryear be considered homeless if they bunked every night around a campfire on the lonesome prairie? The conflict apparently stems from other criteria, however illogical, but also very common in matters of prejudicial and stereotypical thinking.

It is not my primary agenda to explain the reasons for prejudicial thinking in regard to street people who fly the sign, but I would propose some possibilities. In American culture, there seems to be some underlying friction among “working” men and men who work in an office. The working man applies labels such as “pencil pusher,” whereas the office worker may refer to the working man as a “mere laborer.” In the former instance, the friction seems to revolve around who is doing the *real* work in an organization. One might also insert the adjective “honest day’s” instead of “real.” There is some jealousy and perhaps some inequity expressed by the working man. The prejudices of the office worker may stem from a sense of not being fully appreciated by the other. The office worker may consider himself to be more intelligent or more refined than the working man. Dan believed, whether true or not, that a police officer would harass him because his work was considered “easy.” There may be some truth to this, but beyond this reason, street begging is considered by some people to be an *illegitimate form of work*.

Part of the prejudice and discrimination directed at street people may stem from their *use* of gifts. Buying booze with the gift is unacceptable. One must purchase food if

one is really suffering. One must *survive*. Thus some clients feel better about their benevolence if what they give is food or clothing. Clients can be divided into two groups based upon the types of gifts offered. The group that gives food and clothing has more moral compunctions than those who freely give cash. Among non-givers, there may be some suspicion that street people are getting rich off of their work, that their suffering is a mere con game. I grant that there is an element of “Hollywood” in the activities of those who fly the sign, but the data from my interviews with street people reveal that they generally make only a few dollars daily, and that when their quota is earned, they cease working.

I interpret the underlying conflict between some members of the dominant culture and street beggars to stem from the defiance of the latter to the cherished values and sentiments of the former. According to Hebdige (1979), the activities, garb, and communication of members of a subculture may challenge existing structures and beliefs, and these material forms are symbolic of defiance. The symbols may operate on an unconscious level, but the effects are felt in a sense of uneasiness, fear, or repulsion. As identified by Weber and Marx, the existing economic features of capitalism entail the earning of a surplus. In our modern world, this surplus is used by the masses to acquire property or services: cars, homes, clothing, plumbing, electricity, telephones, and various forms of leisure objects or club memberships. Street people go against the grain of what is expected. They do not buy or possess homes. They are basically pedestrian. They do not bathe on a regular basis, and they wear shoddy clothing. The behavior of street

people may be viewed as subversive and inimical to the well-being of society. They represent a poison that could infect society and its current way of life.

The concept of *vocation* has religious antecedents and goes beyond the concept of work. The founders of ancient religions and religious saints received a call to a vocation or mission, whatever that mission might be. Some of the features of the initial calling might include (1) hallucinations or visions, interpreted by followers as the indwelling of the divine essence, (2) resistance to the call due to the odious or highly stressful, perhaps unconventional nature of the mission, (3) a period of trial or initiation, (4) a period of apprenticeship or preparation, (5) withdrawal from the community, or being set apart from the larger flow of social consciousness, and (6) the work, or mission to perform (Druvers 1987:294-96).

To understand the meaning of vocation in modern society, one might compare the terms “profession” and “job,” wherein a profession entails more than just work, but also a mission to perform. I detected this sense of urgency in Don’s insistence that he continue to fly the sign. One might argue that flying the sign is one of a small number of job possibilities for an active alcoholic, and that the “choice” that Dan made in choosing this profession was not really a choice at all, but what is left after a larger number of possibilities is eliminated. Yet this skepticism fails to explain Dan’s expression of “flying the sign” as being “in his blood” I have no doubt that if Dan understood the implications of vocation, he would heartily admit that flying was his vocation, instead of “just a job.”

Dan's activity is a means of survival. It is a job, but from the perspective of calling and vocation, it entails more. For example, what exactly is Dan's mission? The answer to this question, beyond selfish benefit, lies in his affect on others who see him. Dan remarked on several occasions that he makes people feel good about their giving. But Dan is also like an irritating gadfly, and one must admit that there is a place for gadfly-like behavior to the benefit of the larger society. Socrates thought of himself as a gadfly who irritated the composure of the ignorant, and ultimately this irritation escalated to designs on his life. In what ways could Dan be conceived as a gadfly? He stands in marked contrast to the values of the larger society in regard to family and parental roles, employment, property acquisition (the ultimate expression of which is having a home), temperance, cleanliness, and community. Dan displays symbols of defiance as a member of a subculture, in his garb, his mannerisms, his style of communication, and his lifestyle. The subversive character of these symbols insures conflict with the larger society. The message, however tacit, is never subtle: the points are made and the delivery is more effective than if Dan were standing behind a lectern, speaking loudly to an audience. Dan's message is one of defiance, and one must have access to Dan's biography to understand why he is defiant.

One cannot conceive of Dan's begging as work or as a vocation without an understanding of his predicament with alcohol. He couches his justification for his lifestyle in the language of drinking: "I choose to drink. But this job at the sandwich factory. It's only temporary. My real job is flying the sign. You know that. It's in my blood. I like the freedom. I was meant to fly the sign, and I know it."

The answers to his choice of the street life are tied closely with his excessive and culturally inappropriate consumption of this mood-altering substance. They are two sides of the same coin: vocation/booze. One does not exist without the other. One has no meaning without the other. Dan argues for his choice of living on the street with notions of freedom, the absence of public scrutiny, the absence of accountability. Dan realized at some point in his life that his special relationship with booze could not be maintained in traditional ways. The life on the street, concomitant with running dumpsters, begging, picking cans, or flying the sign, was the only option available to a man who lost his tenure in a conventional job. This life was the only life available to the man who drinks.

It was Thursday, June 4. A constant drizzle of rain brought no relief to a week of temperatures in the upper 90s. (I had started this second, three-day stint with Dan on Tuesday evening, two days ago.) We were sitting under the overpass of the interstate highway, shielded from the gentle rain. The rains started about 5:00 this morning, when Dan and I decided to seek shelter. This gave us an opportunity to talk about different topics. I was remembering the events of the past three weeks. Dan had been admitted into ER on May 10. I met his ex-wife (Wanda), daughter (Janet), and grandchildren on that day. I interviewed Wanda on the following day, and she was able to confirm much of what Dan has related regarding his relationship with his family. I interviewed Wanda again on May 26. On both occasions I met her at the Cracker Barrel for breakfast. Although I had set two appointments with Janet during this time, she cancelled on both occasions due to family illnesses, although I was able to interview her on the telephone.

Dan had called a friend, Purdis McCoy, to locate Tia at one of the camps, and he had been successful. Dan was released from the hospital on Tuesday morning, May 12, and he began working at the sandwich factory after lunch. He was able to live at New Hope Ministries, a temporary residence for homeless and alcoholic men. One of the requirements of the facility was that Dan attend three AA meetings per week.

I met Dan on eight occasions during this period of conventional work. I was able to obtain a bicycle for him, donated from the Freeman Center, a local alcohol and drug abuse treatment center. According to the director, a resident had abandoned the bicycle about a year ago, and it had been stored in a shed. The bicycle and tires were in good condition, and Dan was able to ride to and from work. Dan worked from 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in the afternoon, Monday through Friday. On two days, May 14-15, I took Dan to work and picked him up, and he was glad for the lifts. This also gave us a chance to talk about work, family, and life at New Hope. I was able to interview Jake, Dan's supervisor, about Dan's performance and work history. According to Jake, Dan was a dependable, honest worker who was willing to work for minimum wage. Jake related that he himself was a recovering alcoholic, having been sober, "this time around," for three years. He said that he sympathized with Dan's predicament in life and felt an emotional bond with him.

During the evening of May 28, Dan called me at home and related that he had worked his last day at the factory. He was calling from Shims' store, and he said that he was returning to The Cane Thicket to see what condition it was in. Then he was going to the McCoy's to get Tia. For the next two days, I visited with Dan in both camps. I

learned that Dan had earned over \$400.00 from his 100 hours labor at the factory. Dan also had received his reimbursement check from the IRS during this time, amounting to \$316.00. He sold the bicycle I had given him for \$20.00 to a new resident at New Hope. Out of the \$736.00, he gave nearly \$400.00 of it to his daughter who did not have medical insurance and who had incurred some expenses due to medical treatment for family illnesses.

As the rains increasingly fell, I remembered the justification Dan had given me a few days ago for quitting the factory: “I got thirsty.” I was already aware that detoxification from alcohol took about three to four days with medical supervision. This means that after four days Dan had already experienced withdrawal from his addiction. The period of acute withdrawal was past, although Dan, if he remained sober, would continue to experience post-acute withdrawal syndrome (PAWS) for up to two years. PAWS is, as the name suggests, of a relatively minor character and involves unpleasant physical sensations as the body continues to re-stabilize itself after a lengthy period of alcohol addiction and abuse. I decided to explore further Dan’s justification for quitting work.

“Hey Dan. You said that you quit working for Jake because you got thirsty.”

“Yep.” Tia was lying with her head in her paws, but eyeing Dan as he spoke.

“Well, I’d like to know what you meant by that. I know that you had been detoxed for a couple of weeks.”

“I got thirsty means that I started craving booze.”

“Okay. Yeah, I know that. Hmm. Weren’t you feeling better, being sober? Why would you want to give that up? I’m not really sure what I want to know.”

Dan helped me. “I think I know what you want. You see, I crave drink, but it’s not just the drink I crave.” Dan stroked the back of Tia’s neck. “I had to get back to work. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“You mean you had to get back to flying the sign?” Dan recognized a puzzled look on my face.

“Yeah, that’s my real job. That’s who I am. I need the freedom to be my own boss. I need to be free from the burdens of bills and punching clocks. And, well, drinking is part of who I am too.”

“But drinking is what nearly killed you three weeks ago and put you in the hospital!”

Dan grinned. “I know. I don’t want to die any more than you do. But can’t you see that I’m happy in this life?”

“Yes. I can see that you flourish in this environment. Yeah, you are happy.”

“We all die. It’s just a matter of when. I would like to prolong my life as much as possible, but this is my life, even if it kills me. I’m content.” Dan interjected, “You know, the only thing about sitting under this bridge: it’s awfully noisy, and my ears are pretty sensitive.”

I agreed with Dan, but I asked him to elaborate more on what it meant to live his life and fly the sign.

“To begin with, I don’t wanna work any more than I have to. I worked hard for years and don’t have anything to show for it. When I fly, I fly for what I need that day. And when people give out the window they feel good too. You might say I’m lazy. I don’t deny it, but I think everybody’s a little bit lazy, even those unlucky people who work themselves to death trying to pay their bills. There are jobs where you do the work and quit, but most of the time you gotta work with other people. And you can’t drink! I don’t mind telling you that I have to drink to be happy. You saw how irritated I got, working at the factory. I was depressed and lonely. And it got worse every day. I longed for the bottle, but I knew I had to give my liver a rest. And I wanted to give Janet some extra money.”

“Dan, you mentioned that you gave Janet \$300.00 for her wedding dress. Did you make that money at the factory?”

“Nope. I made it all out the window. Worked extra on the street and saved it. Took me working every day, all day long, for twelve days. At the end of every day, I was tired and sore from standing outside. It even rained for two days straight, and it was darn cold! But I did it for her and her husband.”

“So, when you were working at the factory, you missed this lifestyle and you missed the bottle. You didn’t feel right.”

“That’s it. And I was neglecting my job.”

“What job? Flying?”

“Yep.”

“How were you neglecting that?”

“Flying is part of who I am, but I do a service to those who give out the window. Some of ‘em need to feel good about themselves. Some are feeling guilty because they’re not the Christians they should be. They see me, and things click. On, on the spur of the moment I’m there, and they decide to help me, if they want to. And when they help me, they help themselves.”

I thought about Greg Levoy’s work on vocation. *Callings*, by their very nature, may entail some discomfort, but people feel complete and in sync when they submit to its demands. A calling can have disastrous results, as in the case of Dan, and sometimes one’s calling can only be understood in retrospect, after a life lived.

Better for our overall composure to focus on whether a particular call has *integrity* or not, whether it makes us feel more or less *authentic*, more or less *connected* to ourselves and others, more or less *right*, not morally but intuitively. Better to ask whether a call will give us a feeling of *aliveness*. . . . There is, however, a dark side to callings. . . . Our actions may not be met with approval from a panel of experts or a jury of our peers (Levoy 1997).

The drizzle of rain continued to fall, the sounds of cars and trucks whished by, and the sky began to grow darker toward evening, but time seemed to be unimportant as I sat with Dan against a column underneath I35. We spent half the night there but by 4:00 a.m. the rain had subsided, and Dan and I were both eager to resume our sleep in The Cane Thicket. Our backs, limbs, and undersides were aching and even a rain-drenched campground was preferred to the noisy, concrete environment of the past twenty-four hours.

Chapter 17: Humility and Humiliation

The weather was balmy, with occasional rain and temperatures in the upper 90s. I was with Dan in Day Camp. I had clocked 122 hours with Dan during the month of June. I had met with Wanda for the fourth time, interviewing her at the Cracker Barrel for breakfast. This three-day stint with Dan was my third. I was growing accustomed to both of the camps. And I was beginning to understand how, in the course of time, one might become less attentive about his appearance on the street. After all, there was no one to please, and the more unkempt one's appearance, the better his chances of being successful at flying the sign.

I met several of Dan's friends during the month. These were street people who lived in other camps, but who would visit Dan from time to time and share moments at his "office," flying the sign. I thought about how street people passed the time. Some activities were obvious: talking and drinking. But having a guest fly on one's corner was somewhat of a ritual or rule of etiquette. Dan told me that it was a sign of respect to fly as a guest. "It's like letting someone fish in your tank," explained Dan. Flying is also a source of interest to street people, and it provides opportunities for conversation. I myself flew the sign twice during the month of June, and Dan had suggested that I fly today.

"It's the day before a major holiday [July 3]. People are getting off work and feeling like celebrating, and they want to share this feeling with friends. Anytime people are in a good mood--that's a good time to fly. Besides, it's . . . what? 2:30? Everyone's

getting off from work and thinking about barbecue and drinking. They're thinking about drinking and what they're gonna buy. And you haven't flown in the rain, so you need to see what it's like. But hold the sign under your jacket a little so it won't get too wet."

I nodded and picked up Dan's cardboard sign. I was wearing an old, yellow windbreaker that was sun-bleached in spots and dotted with blue paint. I made my way out to the median. I was losing a great deal of my apprehension about flying. My beard and hair were of a length now that I felt adequately disguised for the task. My fear of meeting some motorist I knew had turned out to be unfounded so far. I was beginning to feel comfortable flying the sign. But I was unprepared for the humiliation I was about to experience.

Within five minutes I got a lick. A teenage girl handed me a five-dollar bill. I thanked her and backed up to the median again. I looked at Dan who was watching me. Dan studied my movements and activities on the median as he did all of his guests. He was very perceptive and accurate in his interpretations of what he saw. I figured that Dan knew how much money I had just made out of the window. I was thinking how uncanny it was, when I heard the words, "Hey asshole! Need some money?" I looked around to see a white Dodge pickup truck with extended cab. The chassis was a good two-and-a-half feet off of the pavement.

I saw an arm extended from the window. As I approached the truck, I was thinking that I was not supposed to refuse handouts. This is what Dan had taught me. To accept a gift without question, however inappropriate or unneeded it might be, would destroy the rapport with Dan's clientele and possibly jeopardize the livelihood of others

who fly. I noticed that the cab had four occupants, all teenage boys. I noticed that one of the boys in the back of the cab was holding a beer bottle. When I got to the window, I reached out, but the boy withdrew his hand and then grabbed a large paper cup and threw it at me. It hit me in the face and the liquid contents splashed all over me. As the truck sped away, amid cries of derisive laughter, I heard one of the boys yell, "Get a bath, you pervert!" A line of motorists drove by, looking at me as something repulsive and pitiful. I was stunned, but my astonishment quickly turned to anger. "How dare those brats treat me this way!" I thought to myself. I felt that I was the object of abject ridicule, a pariah. I tried to control the emotions welling up within me.

I reasoned that I needed a break to recollect my composure. I walked the familiar path to Day Camp. Dan was standing when I arrived.

"I saw that. You okay?"

"Damn! I am so pissed at those punks. What right do they have to treat me like that?" I could not sit down, because adrenalin was still coursing through my veins.

"Wanna beer?" Dan held out an unopened Magnum.

"Yeah, thanks. I need a drink after that abuse." I took the bottle, opened it, and took a swig. "God, that was an experience! Look at me! And look at your sign!" The rain had momentarily stopped. I looked at the sign. Some of the lettering was smeared. I felt the sticky residue of the drink that had been hurled at me. "I wish it'd been a diet soda. At least it wouldn't be sticky." Having said that, Dan and I looked at each other and laughed. The laughter brought a degree of instant relief, and I was amazed at how quickly I could change from one emotion to the next.

“That’s what happens sometimes. I don’t like it when they disrespect me.”

“Well, those kids don’t know any better. They’re products of their parents and peers.”

Dan nodded. “You know, you might want to go back out there. That’s what I do. You have to take the good with the bad. And most people are good.”

I took Dan’s advice and returned to the median. The rain had let up temporarily, and within thirty minutes, I’d made sixteen dollars out the window. I returned to camp, pleased with the results, and gave the cash to Dan who accepted it graciously.

“Told you today was a good day. You did good.” Dan stood up and said that he was going to go buy some more Magnums, but I offered to buy it instead. I walked the path to the store and entered, exchanging greetings with Shims. As I was walking to the beer section, I was approaching a woman. When she saw me, she stopped and her eyes widened and then squinted. She turned around and went down another aisle to get to the checkout counter, looking back in my direction for an instant to peer at me. I was, once again, reminded of how easily one can pass from acceptance to rejection in American society. I recalled Orwell’s assessment of similar situations: “Clothes are powerful things. Dressed in a tramp’s clothes it is very difficult, at any rate for the first day, not to feel that you are genuinely degraded. You might feel the same shame, irrational but very real, your first night in prison (1933).”

I grabbed four Magnums and made my way to the counter where Shims was standing. “The woman asked about you.” Shims laughed. “She said that she was afraid you might try to rob her.”

“What? You’re kidding.”

“Oh no. She said it.”

As I walked down the path to Day Camp, I thought of how good it felt to be accepted by Dan and Tia, regardless of my appearance, and I appreciated them in a different way than before. And I realized that these thoughts must also be a part of the consciousness of members of Dan’s subculture, contributing to their sense of belonging and solidarity.

Chapter 18: Poverty, Freedom, and Storytelling

Today was Saturday, October 3. My stay with Dan began late Thursday evening and was to last until tomorrow evening. It was 2:30 p.m., and the ground at Day Camp was wet and muddy from yesterday's thunderstorms and heavy rains. Since Independence Day, I had visited with Dan on thirty-one occasions, which included three-day 'round the clock stints on weekends. During this time, Dan had attended Church under the Bridge on a fairly regular basis, after meeting with Wanda and sometimes Janet and the grandchildren for breakfast at Denny's. He had visited the Salvation Army soup kitchen on two occasions, primarily to visit with fellow street people. And he had spent three nights with the McCoys in Bellmead. In fact, Dan had just returned from a night's stay with the McCoys on Thursday, two days ago, before I met him for the weekend. Dan was very appreciative of this couple who would take him and Tia in from time to time. Dan would visit with them; get a good hot meal and a hot bath. The McCoys would also wash and dry Dan's soiled garments. Dan would feel refreshed and invigorated after returning from a short stay at the McCoys. But what Dan appreciated the most, he said, was getting to sleep on a soft bed. "I could sleep for days on their bed and never wake up." But Dan also admitted that one or two days away from the street was enough to remind him that he had a job that needed tending. "I can't leave flying for too long. It's a responsibility."

As always, Dan was invaluable in assisting me with my field notes, sometimes making needed corrections. As usual, however, Dan would refuse to interact with me

about my interpretations of our dialogues. It was Dan's belief that embedded within the dialogue was the truth, and that it was my task to locate that truth. I was intrigued about Dan's refusal to participate in the theoretical implications of his lifestyle and his interpretations of life.

Dan was seated on his bucket, stroking Tia's neck. I was standing and stretching and yawning. Dan and I had both flown the sign today. He had pocketed eight dollars, and I had added five dollars to the kitty. The rains left their indelible imprint on the ground of the camp, with the smooth mud and the scars of several rivulets making their way to the small creek beyond a grove of trees and brush. Dan was in a pleasant, cheerful mood. The temperature was in the lower 90s, and it was humid.

"Dan, I wish to ask you about the assistance you provide to me--about my field notes, you know." Dan looked at me, listening, while I continued, "You are very helpful, helpful at recalling what was said between the two of us. And I really admire your memory at times. Sometimes the wind conditions or background noise distorts the sounds on the recorder."

"Floyd, you're welcome. Glad to help. I think you're doing a good work with your schooling and all."

"Thanks. But you never comment about my interpretations, the theories in social science for explaining what's going on in your life. And we've talked about this before."

"Yep, we have."

"So tell me more about your reluctance or refusal to comment on those things."

Dan took off his old, red cap with one hand and scratched his head with the other.
“Floyd, you ever used to sit around as a kid, like at a campfire, and tell stories?”

“Yeah, I used to.”

“Well, those stories--that’s what life is about--telling stories. You got your TV and your movies and video games, stuff like that. But out here, on the street, we ain’t got those things.” Dan paused and positioned his cap back on his head. “What we have are *stories*. We *talk* That’s something people have forgotten how to do. I think cowpokes did that around the campfire. That’s what people do when they ain’t got modern conveniences.” Dan stood up and walked a few steps, looking toward the creek area.
“Okay,” he continued, “You ever tell jokes?”

“Sometimes. But I’m not good at ‘em. I usually can’t get the story right.”

Dan chuckled. “Yeah, me too.” He paused, as if recollecting his thoughts. “Did you ever hear a guy tell a joke and then try to explain it for you as he went along?”

“Yeah, it’s like we’re stupid or something. It’s also anticlimactic.”

“There you go.” Dan grinned.

“So you’re saying that by interpreting what you say and what you do with scientific theory is, is *anticlimactic*?”

“Whatever that word is, sounds like it. I would say that when you tell a story, and I’m not saying the stories are not true, but when ya tell a story, you’ve said it all, *right there*.” Dan emphasized the last two words.

“Dan, wow, I think I see what you’re saying. I never thought about it that way. But I have to include that stuff, to flesh it out, to try to understand what’s going on in some way.”

“You do what you have to do to make ‘em happy, but as long as *you* know that that stuff is extra and anti-what-did-you-say? As long as you know, well, I forgot what I, where I was going with that.” Dan grinned. “Don’t matter, you know what I mean, don’t ya?”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks Dan. I think that what you’ve said is very insightful. You know, I was listening to you talk to Paul here yesterday. He’s got some good stories, I will admit. The time he nearly drowned in the river and that other man dove in after him, and in all the commotion, all he had to do was put his feet down!”

Dan and I laughed again at the story. “And there’s a moral to that story, but you don’t want me to tell you what it is, do ya?”

“Unh-uh. Dan, do you always share your bottle with your friends?”

“Sure. I will share with anyone, because next time around I might need their help. It’s the code of the street. I might be without anything or be robbed, but I know I can find someone who’ll help me.”

“Dan, is it a little scary sometimes, not having much? You exist from day to day. That would be very scary to me. I have to know that I have a paycheck coming in, that I have a job, that I have sick days; otherwise, I might not be able to pay my bills and everything would be repossessed.”

“There. You see? There’s a freedom from worry that comes with being poor, being a bum. You live from day to day, I guess, like you said before, but there are other street people--people like me in every town, and I know where to find ‘em.”

I recalled on September 22 that Dan had accompanied me in my minivan and took me to the locations of other homeless camps in the Waco area. We counted sixteen camps that day, all of them within several feet of a major thoroughfare but invisible to the untrained eye. Dan did know where to go for help if he needed it. And the moral code of helping that one experiences among the homeless is a mainstay and an anchor when one finds himself on rough waters.

“Dan, do you ever get bored? You seem to always find things interesting, and sometimes I have to, uh, expand my perspective in order to find the events of the day meaningful when I’m with you.”

“I think you answered your own question, Floyd. I don’t believe in being bored. That’s something people made up when they started listening to TV and having to go places all the time. People have, they have forgotten how to find things around ‘em interesting. That’s something I had to relearn. When you live on the street, you relearn it or you--well, some bums find solace in the bottle, but not me. I need booze to keep from getting sick, but I hardly ever get drunk anymore. Now, I’ll go crazy if I *quit* drinking.”

Dan sat down on his bucket and whistled to Tia who continued to lie on the ground but began to wag her tail.

“Now, at first, I got plenty bored. And sometimes I got very hungry and I thought I couldn’t stand I was so weak. But by the time we [‘Fessor Tom and Dan] got to

Eugene, I was beginning--no, take that back--by the time we got to Vancouver and had stayed there for a month, I learned to not be bored. I learned to find life around me interesting, like when I was a little boy. I just had to relearn it, that's all."

"And it took your becoming a bum to recover the excitement and interest in life, like when you were a child?"

"Yeah. Yep, it did. I learned to live for the moment, from day to day. Before? Hmm. I was always thinking about next week, or tomorrow, about my paycheck, like everyone else, about getting off work and drinking. I wasn't satisfied with *now*. There's no sense, absolutely no sense in trying to rush life. You can't speed it up anyway. And if you're always dwelling on tomorrow, then you miss what today has in store for ya."

"Damn. That's profound!"

Dan chuckled. "Being alone on the street gives you time to think about things, the important things. Before though, I just sped by, like everyone else. Now I live for the moment. That's where life is on the street."

Chapter 19: Life Goes On and Life Ends

For the next six months, I continued to meet with Dan at his camps, at the Church under the Bridge, and at the median where he flew the sign. The autumn season brought with it cooler temperatures, falling leaves, long shadows, and the anticipation of something in the air. On fifty-four more occasions, I met with Dan and shared his unique and provocative life. As winter came, I realized that I had endured with Dan all of the vicissitudes of Texas weather: the unbearable three-digit figures on the thermometer, the gales against which we found it difficult to walk or even to stand, the humid heat of still days when our clothes stuck to our bodies, the downpours of rains that encroached upon our mean existence, the chills of wintry blasts, and the freezing precipitation that numbed one's limbs and fingers and toes. Beyond the weather, we braved life in the open, on the streets, among rodents and crawling creatures and flying insects. We made do without running water and electricity, changes of clothes, and warm, comfortable beds. And we had the courage to be vulnerable to whatever or whoever might be lurking in the shadows. And when we flew the sign, we stood our ground when intimidated, threatened, maligned, or simply snubbed by motorists and pedestrians.

I last saw Dan on Monday, April 19. Temperatures were in the lower 80s with a slight breeze. The sun shown brightly in a cloudless sky. It was pleasant again, reminiscent of last spring when I first met Dan. Business was slow on Dan's corner. We spent the day in Day Camp. Dan told me that he had vomited blood during the night. Tia was ill also, refusing to eat, content to lie about without apparent motivation. I suggested

to Dan that he go into detox at the Freeman Center and have the resident nurse check his physical condition. I reasoned that the detox was free and Dan could benefit from a period of sobriety. I reminded Dan of his Dark Night of the Soul. While Dan was flying, I called the Freeman Center and learned that two beds were available for detox. When Dan returned from flying, I informed him of this and offered to drive him to the unit. Dan refused. I was concerned about Dan's refusal for a couple of reasons. One was the poor condition of his present health. The other was that I had to suspend my visits with Dan for a coming period of time, and I felt responsible for insuring that he would be taken care of in my absence.

I was having marital difficulties that required my attention. I told Dan that I was unsure how long I would be gone, but that I would attempt to check on him from time to time. Dan was very understanding, and he encouraged me to do what I must to save my marriage. And so I bid Dan and Tia farewell and walked the familiar path to my minivan. I remember thinking that, for once, Dan would not be available to assist me in transcribing my field notes from this day.

From July to November, I attempted on several occasions to locate Dan at his two camps but was unsuccessful. And I had noticed something strange on the streets of Waco during this time: the apparent absence of street people flying the sign. I learned through an informant at the Waco Police Department that the new Chief had initiated an aggressive agenda of removing undesirable bums from the streets. Whenever someone would attempt to fly the sign, he was harassed by police officers until he either discontinued his practice or left town. On Thanksgiving Day, I spoke with Wanda, who

confirmed my worse suspicions. Dan had succumbed to a complication of liver disease and had died at Providence Hospital ER in May, 1999. Dan was forty-six years old. His survivors included an ex-wife, a daughter, and three grandchildren. Wanda buried him in Rose Mound Cemetery at the end of South 12th Street. She told me that she was finally able to purchase something for him, in this case a lot and tombstone that he would surely have refused if he were alive.

Chapter 20: Ethnographic Recap

In March of 1998, I was engaged in fieldwork with homeless, street people who beg at the intersections of thoroughfares within the city of Waco, Texas (pop. 120,000). Waco is located on Interstate 35, 100 miles north of Austin and 100 miles south of Dallas. “Street people” stand in medians or on the side of roads near intersections. The locations of their activities are strategic, psychologically effective, and involve an economy of effort. Street beggars appear for units of time at the height of traffic activity and congestion. They are visible for provocative encounters, and then they seem to vanish.

They stand quietly with cardboard signs in hand. The messages written on the signs are designed to promote sympathetic giving by passing motorists. The beggars, by their demeanor and clothing, convey further unspoken messages that reinforce the written ones. The beggar usually stands alone, and the immediate area surrounding his sphere of activity is his territory that is respected by other beggars. My primary informant was Dan, and this ethnography centers on his life over a thirteen-month period of time.

My method of data collection was fieldwork, or participant observation, which Underwood (1993:331) described as “hanging out with people in their natural habitat with my tape recorder on.” I was very much intrigued with his dialogical presentation of narrative ethnography. My ethnography is also written in narrative, dialogical fashion, in temporal sequences, and focuses on certain themes or topics of interest.

The pervading theme, however, is that of vocation and calling. I recognize that there is an ambivalence regarding work with Dan and with other street persons in the Waco area. In some sense, they do not think of their begging activities as work, but in another sense they do. A member of a subculture participates in two realities: that of the values and norms of the dominant culture and that of the values and norms of his subculture. I believe that this dual participation explains some of the ambivalence in Dan's thinking about begging as a form of work. In his private thoughts disclosed in the company of a friend/ethnologist, Dan opts for his activities as work or vocation. When viewed in the context of the larger society, Dan will vacillate, usually in favor of the non-work thesis. In some sense, Dan considered his activities on the street corner to be *work*, although he recognizes that some members of the dominant culture would disagree with him. I developed the concept of work further, however, identifying features of *vocation* in Dan's work. When viewed as vocation, one cannot doubt that Dan was committed to this activity and one detects a sense of urgency about his responsibilities in this area. The disbelief that Dan could be engaged in any type of productive work stems, to some extent, from prejudicial thinking, and to some extent from differences in definitions of what qualifies as work. From a logical standpoint, Dan satisfies the basic features of *work* and some of the criteria for *vocation*.

In learning the ways of this unique subculture, one must become acquainted with the jargon that is spoken. A "street person" is a homeless person who makes a living by begging, in one form or another. "Flying the sign" or, simply, "flying" means standing alongside the street holding a sign for the purpose of obtaining gifts of money or other

goods. “Out the window” denotes the spatial point of cultural encounter. “Made out the window” means that the source of the gift was the outstretched arm of the motorist. A “lick” is a successful encounter. “Running dumpsters” means to inspect them for usable or exchangeable food or goods. “Picking cans” means to pick up discarded, aluminum cans for resale at recycling stations. A “rock star” is a street beggar who is addicted to crack cocaine and who begs to support his habit. A “salt and pepper team” is a working duo composed of different racial stock, i.e. white and black. A “camp” is an outdoor area used as a nearby station for street activity or for interacting with other members of the in-group, or it is a place to bed down for the night. “Hollywood” entails the behavior, garb, and props of the performance.

Some of the popular perceptions of Dan’s lifestyle have been challenged and perhaps corrected. The public may view Dan as a homeless person without roots. He is seen by many as having lost it all: job, family and friends, home, possessions, clothes, health, dignity, and self worth. He may be viewed as dirty, smelly, and repulsive. He may be depicted as lazy and unmotivated, unable to delay gratification, mentally unstable, suspicious, untrustworthy, or dangerous. Some or all of these stereotypes may be used as justifications for discrimination by some members of the larger public.

This ethnography has sought to present Dan’s lifestyle from his point of view. It may not be able to exonerate him of many of the complaints mentioned, but it may be able to foster understanding, tolerance, and perhaps an appreciation for these subcultural differences. One may also discover some degree of character and positive personality traits in Dan as a member of this subculture. In some cases the charges may be

unfounded and unsubstantiated, mere propaganda to further marginalize the victims. And the challenges that Dan presents with his provocative lifestyle are also, in some sense, defiant and subversive in character. One should not overlook this aspect of the challenge to prevailing cultural fashions.

The dialogues duly recorded and used as the basis of the ethnography at times entail truths and existential circumstances that may not be easily elucidated by social scientific theory or academic concepts. It is true that sometimes the existential features of one's life have an ineffable quality about them. Sometimes the bare words, the stories, are more powerful than the running commentary and footnotes. It could justifiably be said that in order to truly grasp the meaning of Dan's life, one must learn to think like him. Dan thought and interpreted his life in terms of dialogue and stories. This ethnography is a type of interpretive model as well as a tribute to an exemplary person.

In my dealings with Dan, I learned that he seemed uninterested in my interpretations of his life, using as I did academic/social scientific concepts as well as allusions from literature or poetry. Dan has his own interpretation of his life, and I believe that I have captured some of the essence of his understanding. This does not mean that Dan disagreed with some of the concepts I was struggling with, such as vocation and work, invisibility, or impression management. I believe that Dan just recognized that these were unfamiliar concepts to him. At the same time, I surmised that Dan had faith in my efforts at interpretation, and that the end result would be beneficial not only to him but to other street people who shared his predicament in life.

Dan's situation in life is embedded in a larger historical, economic, and cultural milieu. From an etiological point of view, Dan's situation seemed to stem primarily from his predicament with alcoholism. I am aware that there is a tendency to distort the causes of homelessness by referring to ready images of mental illness or alcoholism. The "language of disability" may be the culprit in such cases, portraying the state of homelessness as the end result of such disabilities. Some distorting tendencies ignore the biographical and subcultural contexts of heavy drinking among homeless populations. In their study of homeless populations in the Austin, Texas area, Snow and colleagues found that the psychological impact of a homeless lifestyle may predispose one to drink heavily (Snow *et al.* 1994). In Dan's case, the predicament of alcoholism appears to be the catalyst for his discharge from the Air Force, for the breakup of his marriage and family, and for his choice of a vocation as a street beggar. I do not believe that one can understand Dan's life or the life of many other street persons without understanding the powerful force that addiction has in steering one toward goals within a marginal lifestyle. Having said that, however, I also understand that the more that Dan participated in the condition of homelessness, the more that heavy drinking became an essential ingredient and feature of his identity. Additionally, in keeping with Hebdige's notion of style or fashion, drinking behavior among the homeless may be viewed as subcultural improvisation. This notion of bricolage could also aid in balancing out the distorting tendencies of the language of disability.

Goffman's dramaturgical-type analysis, wherein behavior is seen as the acting out of scripts in a theatrical way, was useful in understanding the performance or

“Hollywood” of the beggar, but also in conveying messages of moral worth, values, the tentative nature of one’s distress, and sympathy. Also useful was Hebdige’s concept of the use of mundane objects as symbols of defiance and subversion.

The nature of invisibility is in some instances spatial and in other instances psychological. It is interesting that both visibility and invisibility are both related to survival. A street beggar chooses a lifestyle that sometimes offers freedom from responsibility, but the subcultural fashions in turn become tokens of a self-imposed exile, to use Hebdige’s phrase. By identifying with a lifestyle, one assumes an identity, an identity involving stigma. Stigma, in turn, leads to some type of isolation from the larger community, and may entail victimization from harassment and other discriminatory acts. To survive, one must hide; otherwise, he may be arrested or assaulted, or his property may be stolen. The street person lives within a few feet of major thoroughfares, but his whereabouts is unknown and hidden from view. The location of his camps is a secret. Paradoxically, one must survive by begging and this means accosting persons on the street and becoming highly visible to the public. A street beggar ventures out in the public arena, in full view, at busy intersections where there are a number of observers and witnesses, and he dresses and acts in provocative ways, thus heightening his visibility. The contrast is therefore from one extreme to the other, from invisibility to visibility in a most dramatic fashion. Even so, in the midst of full exposure and disclosure, certain members of the “public” may pretend not to see him, rendering him “invisible.” Within these parameters, the street beggar operates and flourishes.

Appendix: Notes on Method

When I began my fieldwork, I recorded interviews using a battery-operated, hand-held tape recorder. Faithfully, at the conclusion of each day, I transcribed these dialogues, which proved to be tedious. Sometimes, due to wind conditions or noise, I was frustrated in my attempts to decipher the recordings. And so I devised a system to compensate for my inadequacies. On my very next meeting with Dan, I would go over my transcriptions with him. He was very helpful in recalling what was said, sometimes a week before. But even then it was still sometimes difficult to reproduce the exact word or phrase that was spoken. In these cases, based upon the immediate context of the conversation, I would recreate, as best I could, the essence of what was said. And here again, Dan was instrumental in pointing out a few errors along the way. The practice of recording interviews continued from March 20, 1998 until January 11, 1999.

From January 13, 1999 until March 2, 1999, I alternated between the use of the recorder and handwritten notes. The truth is that I was tiring of the transcriptions and found it easier on some occasions simply to take notes. Of course, a difficulty encountered here is in recreating verbatim of what was said. It was crucial that I transcribe the notes into some type of ethnographic format before day's end, and admittedly it was difficult on some days to find time for this. But for all the times I had field notes to transcribe, there were only four days out of the 124 days of fieldwork with Dan that I failed to transcribe *that very day*. I did manage, however, to transcribe them within three days of fieldwork, but I found it more difficult to recall enough for accurate renderings. There were three additional instances wherein I was unable to transcribe on

the day of fieldwork, of course, and that was during the 12 three-day spans that I spent with Dan around the clock. Obviously I could not leave the field in order to transcribe field notes. But I did transcribe them, in each instance, on the day that I returned home or to the office. And thus I caution any fieldworker to transcribe his notes at day's end, if possible.

From March 7, 1999 until April 19, 1999, only handwritten notes were taken, and paraphrases were always employed to recreate what was said. During the period between January 13 and April 19, 1999, I still had Dan assist me in recreating the dialogues from our most recent encounter, except for the last day of our meeting. Thus during my sessions with Dan, the first item on our agenda was always to delve right in to the "quality assurance" aspects of transcriptions. I am very grateful to Dan for his support in this area, and I believe that most informants would not have participated in this tedious, mundane feature of data recording with the interest and enthusiasm that Dan manifested on a regular basis. I believe that the friendship that developed between us during our thirteen months in the field helped sustain Dan's unusual interest in our work. By the second month, I sensed that Dan had become rather attached to the progress of the research, and that his investment of time and energy nurtured a sense of ownership in the developing project.

A feature of my daily transcriptions was to include my observations, thoughts, and interpretations along with the dialogues as I typed them. This, I found later, was a very effective means of recording my impressions and reactions to the material as I was introduced to it. Later, impressions and interpretations were layered onto the core product, representing sustained-time reflections as well as initial reactions. Thus a more balanced and interpretive product was the result of this procedure.

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Vita

Floyd Wesley Berry was born in San Antonio, Texas on April 30, 1951, the son of Tonita Berry and Floyd Berry. After completing his work at Llano High School, Llano, Texas, in 1969, he entered Baylor University in Waco, Texas. While working as a draftsman for a local steel fabricator, he completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1979. He was awarded a fellowship and entered the Graduate School at Baylor University in 1979. He was employed as a probation officer for McLennan County during his master's work and earned his Master of Arts degree in 1984. In August 1985 he entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin. In his capacity as a probation officer, he taught certification classes for probation officers and for drug offender instructors in the State of Texas, under the auspices of Sam Houston State University and the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. From 1988-1992 he served as Editor-in-Chief of the refereed Texas Probation Journal, culminating in his reception of the Judge Terry L. Jacks Award for being the outstanding probation officer in the State of Texas. Since 1988, he has taught sociology, anthropology, and criminal justice classes at colleges in the Waco area. He retired from probation work in 2004, and he has continued to work as a licensed counselor in the areas of chemical dependency on both a part-time and full-time basis.

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